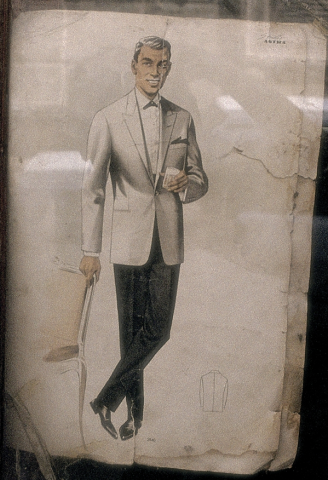
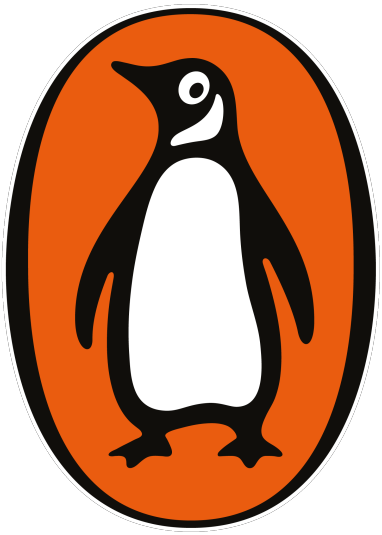
GEORGES SIMENON



Maigret and the Man on the Bench

INSPECTOR MAIGRET



Georges Simenon

Maigret and the Man on the Bench

Translated by David Watson

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points . . . 'understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

1. The Yellow Shoes

For Maigret the date was easy to remember, as it was his sister-in-law's birthday: 19 October. It was a Monday, which also made it memorable, as it is common knowledge at Quai des Orfèvres that murders rarely take place on Mondays. And as well as this, it was the first investigation of the year that had a feel of winter about it.

It had rained all day Sunday, a fine, cold drizzle; the rooftops and the pavements were black and glistening, and a yellowish mist seemed to creep in through the gaps in the windows, leading Madame Maigret to say:

'I should think about getting some draught excluders put in.'

Every autumn for the last five years at least Maigret had promised to fit them himself the following Sunday.

'You should wear your thick overcoat.'

'Where is it?'

'I'll go and look for it.'

It was 8.30. All the apartments still had their lights on, and Maigret's overcoat smelled of mothballs.

It didn't rain that day. At least, not a rain that you could see, but the pavements remained damp and became progressively more slippery as the crowds walked over them. Then, around four in the afternoon, a short while before it got dark, that same yellowish mist of the morning returned, blurring the lights of the streetlamps and the shop windows.

When the telephone rang, neither Lucas nor Janvier nor young Lapointe were in the room. It was answered by Santoni, a Corsican who was new to the brigade, having worked ten years in the Gambling Squad and then Vice.

'It's Inspector Neveu from the third arrondissement, chief. He wants to speak to you in person. It seems it's urgent.'

Maigret grabbed the receiver.

'What is it, my friend?'

'I'm ringing you from a bar on Boulevard Saint-Martin. A body has been found, stabbed with a knife.'

'On the street?'

'No. Not exactly. In a sort of side passageway.'

Neveu had been on the force for a long time, so he knew right away what Maigret was thinking. Stabbings, especially in a working-class area, weren't usually of much interest. Often they were the result of drunken brawls, or else a settling of accounts between gang members, Spanish or North African, for example.

So Neveu made a point of adding:

'There's something really strange about this. I think you should come and see. We are between the large jeweller's and the shop selling artificial flowers.'

'I'm on my way.'

Maigret brought Santoni along with him for the first time. Inside the cramped black police car, Maigret was uncomfortably aware of the scent emanating from him. The Corsican was small in stature and wore stacked heels. His hair was slicked back, and he sported a large yellow diamond, probably fake, on his ring finger.

Dark silhouettes passed by on the dark streets, their soles clicking on the greasy surface. A crowd of about thirty people had gathered on the pavement of Boulevard Saint-Martin, where two policemen stood guard to prevent them moving forwards. Neveu was there waiting for them and he opened the door of their car.

'I asked the doctor to hang on until you got here.'

It was the time of day when this generally crowded corner of the Grands Boulevards was at its busiest. Up above the jeweller's a large clock showed 5.20. The artificial flower shop, which had only a single window, was dimly lit and looked so dusty and faded that you wondered whether anyone ever went in there.

Between the two shops was the entrance to a sort of alleyway that was so narrow that you could easily miss it. It was little more than an unlit passageway between two walls, which probably led into a courtyard of the type that was common in this neighbourhood.

Neveu cleared a path for Maigret. Two or three metres down the alley they found a small group of men waiting for them in the darkness. Two of them were carrying electric torches. You had to

look very closely to make out faces.

It was colder and damper than out on the main street. There was a constant draught. Despite their best efforts to push it away, a dog slipped between their legs.

A man lay on the ground, pressed against the dripping wall, one arm bent under him, the other, with a pale hand at the end of it, almost barring the passageway.

'Dead?'

The local doctor nodded:

'Death would have been instantaneous.'

As if to corroborate these words, the beam from one of the electric torches played over the body, throwing the shape of the knife still implanted in his back into eerie relief. The other torch lit up a semi-profile, an open eye and a cheek that had been scraped by the stones in the wall as the victim slumped to the ground.

'Who found him?'

One of the uniformed officers, who had been waiting for his moment, stepped forwards. It was hard to make out his features. He was young and appeared distressed.

'I was doing my rounds. I usually take a quick look in all the alleyways, because people get up to all sorts there in the dark. I noticed a shape on the ground. At first I thought it was a drunk.'

'Was he already dead?'

'Yes. I think so. But the body was still warm.'

'What time was this?'

'A quarter to five. I whistled to summon a colleague and then rang the station.'

Neveu chipped in:

'I took the call and got here straight away.'

The local police station was a short distance away, on Rue Notre-Dame-de-Nazareth.

Neveu went on:

'I instructed my colleague to call the doctor.'

'Did anyone hear anything?'

'Not to my knowledge.'

There was a door a little further on, with a dimly lit fanlight above it.

'What's that?'

'It leads to the office of the jeweller's. It's rarely used.'

Before he left Quai des Orfèvres Maigret had alerted Criminal

Records, and the forensics team turned up with their equipment and cameras. Like all technical types they didn't ask questions but merely applied themselves to their task; their only concern was how they would manage to work in such a tight space.

'What's at the other end of the courtyard?' Maigret asked.

'Nothing. Just walls. A single door which was nailed shut years ago, leading into a building on Rue Meslay.'

The man had been stabbed in the back – that much was clear – about ten paces into the alleyway. Someone had followed him without a sound, and the passers-by on the main street had been completely oblivious to what was happening.

'I slid my hand into his pocket and found his wallet.'

Neveu handed it to Maigret. One of the forensics men, without being asked, shone a torch on it that was several times brighter than the inspector's.

It was a normal wallet, neither new nor particularly worn, of reasonably good quality, nothing more. It contained three thousand-franc notes and a few hundreds as well as an identity card in the name of Louis Thouret, warehouseman, 37, Rue des Peupliers, in Juvisy. There was also a voter's registration card in the same name, a sheet of paper on which five or six words had been written in pencil and a very old photograph of a little girl.

'Can we make a start?'

Maigret nodded. Flash bulbs popped, cameras clicked. The crowd at the end of the alleyway was growing larger, and the police were struggling to hold them back.

After this, the forensics team carefully pulled out the knife, which was consigned to a special box, and finally they were able to turn the body over. They then saw the face of a man in his forties and his expression of utter bewilderment.

He hadn't understood what was happening to him. He had died without understanding. His look of surprise was so childlike, so much the opposite of tragic, that one of the policemen in the shadows let out a nervous laugh.

His clothes were clean, respectable. He was wearing a dark suit, a beige raincoat and on his feet, which were twisted at an odd angle, he wore greenish-yellow shoes, which seemed out of keeping with a day as colourless as this.

Apart from his shoes, he appeared so ordinary that he would have passed completely unnoticed on the street or on one of the

numerous café terraces on the boulevard. Nevertheless, the policeman who had discovered him said:

'I get the feeling I've seen him before.'

'Where?'

'I don't recall. His face is familiar. You know, he is one of those people you see every day but don't pay any attention to.'

Neveu chipped in:

'He looks familiar to me too. He probably works around here somewhere.'

But this didn't explain why Louis Thouret had come down this narrow alleyway that led nowhere. Maigret turned to Santoni, because he had been in Vice for many years, and in this neighbourhood there are a certain number of sex maniacs with good reason to be lurking in dark alleyways. Nearly all of them are known to the police. A few of them are men of some standing. They get arrested from time to time. When they are released, they take up where they left off.

But Santoni shook his head.

'Never laid eyes on him.'

So Maigret made a decision:

'Carry on, gentlemen. When you've finished, take him off to the Forensic Institute.'

Then, to Santoni:

'Let's go and see the family, if he has any.'

If it had been an hour later he would probably not have gone to Juvisy himself. But he had the car. He was intrigued above all by the sheer ordinariness of the man and even his profession.

'Juvisy.'

They stopped for a short while at a bar at Porte d'Italie and had a beer. Then they were on the highway, streetlights flashing past, overtaking a string of heavy lorries. When they arrived in Juvisy, near the railway station, they asked for directions to Rue des Peupliers but had to approach five people before they found anyone who knew.

'It's over that way, in a new development. When you get there, check the street signs. The streets are all named after trees. They all look the same.'

They drove past the huge marshalling yard, where carriages were constantly being switched from one line to another. There were twenty locomotives, belching steam, whistling, puffing. Carriages

were shunted together with loud clangs. On the right was the edge of a new housing estate, the pattern of streets marked out by electric lights. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of detached houses that all seemed to be the same shape and size, built from the same plan. The famous trees which gave the streets their names had not had time to grow; in places the pavements had not yet been finished; there were still black holes, patches of empty ground, while elsewhere there were gardens already coming into bloom.

Rue des Chênes . . . Rue des Lilas . . . Rue des Hêtres . . . Perhaps one day it would all look like a park, provided all these badly built houses, which resembled a child's construction set, didn't fall down before the trees had grown to full height.

Through kitchen windows, women could be seen preparing dinner. The streets were deserted, just here and there the odd shop, also brand new and apparently run by amateurs.

'Try on the left.'

They drove round for a good ten minutes before they found the name they were looking for inscribed on a blue sign, then missed the house, because number 37 came straight after number 21. There was only one light on – on the ground floor. It was a kitchen. Behind the curtain a rather large woman could be seen coming and going.

'Let's go!' sighed Maigret, extracting himself with some difficulty from the tiny car.

He tapped his pipe on his heel to empty it. As they crossed the pavement, the curtain twitched, and they saw a woman's face fix itself to the windowpane. She couldn't have been used to the sight of a car pulling up opposite her house. He went up the three steps. The front door was in varnished pine, with wrought-iron fittings and two small windows of dark-blue glass. He looked for a doorbell. Before he had managed to find it, a voice came from inside:

'What is it?'

'Madame Thouret?'

'That's me.'

'I'd like to have a word with you.'

She was still reluctant to open the door.

'Police,' Maigret added in a low voice.

That made her mind up: she slid the chain off, pulled back the bolt. Then, through a gap just wide enough to show a thin slice of

her face, she checked out the two men standing on her doorstep.

'What do you want?'

'I have something to tell you.'

'Can you prove that you're from the police?'

It was pure luck that Maigret happened to have his badge in his pocket. Usually, he left it at home. He held it out where the light would shine on it.

'OK, I suppose it's genuine.'

She let them in. The corridor was narrow, with white walls, the doors and door frames of varnished wood. The kitchen door was still open, but she guided them to the next room and turned on the electric light.

She was about the same age as her husband but bigger than him, though she didn't give the impression of being overweight. She was big-boned, and her flesh was firm. The grey dress she was wearing under the apron she was now mechanically taking off did nothing to soften her appearance.

The room they were in was a rustic-style dining room; it probably doubled as a sitting room. Nothing was out of place, like in the display window or shop floor of a furniture seller. Nothing had been left lying around, not a pipe or a packet of cigarettes. No piece of needlework, not even a newspaper, to suggest that there were people who actually spent part of their lives here. She didn't invite them to sit down but merely looked at their feet as if to make sure that they weren't leaving marks on the linoleum.

'I'm listening.'

'Is your husband's name Louis Thouret?'

She nodded; her eyebrows knitted as she tried to guess the purpose of their visit.

'Does he work in Paris?'

'He is deputy manager at Kaplan and Zanin's in Rue de Bondy.'

'Has he ever worked as a warehouseman?'

'Yes, a while back.'

'A long while?'

'A few years ago. Even back then he was the one who kept the business running.'

'Would you happen to have a photograph of him?'

'What for?'

'I'd just like to be sure . . .'

'Be sure of what?'

She was growing more suspicious:

'Has Louis had an accident?'

Involuntarily, she glanced at the kitchen clock, as if to work out where her husband would be at that particular hour of the day.

'I'd like to be sure that he is the same man.'

'On the sideboard . . .' she said.

There were five or six photos there, in metal frames, among them one of a young girl and one of the man who had been found stabbed to death in the alleyway, only younger, dressed in black.

'Do you know if your husband has any enemies?'

'Why would he have any enemies?'

She left them for a moment to turn down a gas ring, where a pan was about to boil over.

'What time does he normally get home from work?'

'He always takes the same train, the 6.22 from Gare de Lyon. Our daughter takes the following train, because she finishes work a little later. She has an important position and—'

'I am obliged to ask you to accompany us to Paris.'

'Is Louis dead?'

She gave them a sharp look, as if to warn them not to lie to her.

'Tell me the truth.'

'He was murdered this afternoon.'

'Where?'

'In an alleyway off Boulevard Saint-Martin.'

'What on earth was he doing there?'

'I don't know.'

'What time did it happen?'

'Shortly after four thirty, as far as we can tell.'

'At four thirty he is at Kaplan's. Have you spoken to them?'

'We haven't had time. Besides, we didn't know where he worked.'

'Who killed him?'

'That's what we are trying to find out.'

'Was he on his own?'

Maigret was becoming impatient.

'Don't you think it would be better if you got dressed and came with us?'

'What have you done with him?'

'By now he should be at the Forensic Institute.'

'The morgue?'

What could he say to that?

‘How can I let my daughter know?’

‘You could leave her a note.’

She thought about this.

‘No. We’ll go to my sister’s and I’ll give her the key. She will come here and wait for Monique. Do you need to see her as well?’

‘Ideally, yes.’

‘Where should she come?’

‘My office, Quai des Orfèvres. That would be the easiest. How old is she?’

‘Twenty-two.’

‘Can’t you contact her by telephone?’

‘Firstly, we don’t have a telephone. Secondly, she will have left work already and be on her way to the station. Wait here.’

She started to walk up the stairs, which creaked under her steps, not from age but because the wood they were made from was too flimsy. The whole house gave the impression of having been built with cheap materials, which would doubtless give out before they grew old.

The two men looked at each other as they listened to the comings and goings above their heads. They would have wagered that she was changing into something black, and probably fixing her hair. When she came back down they exchanged another glance: they were right. She was already in mourning dress and smelling of eau de cologne.

‘I need to turn out the lights and switch off the gas. Would you wait for me outside?’

She hesitated in front of the small car, as if she were worried that she wouldn’t fit in. Someone was watching them from the house next door.

‘My sister lives two streets away. Your driver should go right, then take the second left.’

The two houses were so alike it was as if they were twins. The only difference was the colour of the glass in the front-door windows. These ones were an orangey yellow.

‘I’ll be right back.’

In fact, she was gone a good quarter of an hour. When she returned to the car she was accompanied by a woman who was her spitting image and who was also dressed in black.

‘My sister will come with us. I thought we could all squeeze up. My brother-in-law will go to my house to wait for my daughter. It’s

his day off. He is a train guard.'

Maigret sat next to the driver. The two women in the back left only a tiny amount of space for Inspector Santoni. Every now and again they would whisper to each other as if in a confessional.

When they got to the Forensic Institute near Pont d'Austerlitz, Louis Thouret's body, according to Maigret's instructions, was still fully clothed and had been placed temporarily on a marble slab. It was Maigret who uncovered the head while looking at the two women, whom he was seeing together for the first time in broad daylight. A little earlier, in the darkness of the street, he had taken them for twins. Now he noticed that the sister was the younger by three or four years and that her body had retained a certain softness, though not for much longer, no doubt.

'Do you recognize him?'

Madame Thouret had her handkerchief in her hand but she wasn't crying. Her sister held her arm, as if to comfort her.

'Yes, it's Louis. My poor Louis. When he left me this morning he had no idea—'

She broke off abruptly:

'No one has closed his eyes?'

'You can do it now, if you wish.'

She looked at her sister; they seemed to be unsure which of them should take responsibility. In the end the wife did it, with a certain air of solemnity, murmuring:

'Poor Louis.'

At that point she noticed his feet sticking out from under the sheet and she frowned.

'What's this?'

Maigret didn't understand straight away.

'Who put these shoes on him?'

'He was wearing them when we found him.'

'He can't have been. Louis never wore yellow shoes. In any case, we've been married twenty-six years and he knew that I wouldn't have allowed it. Have you seen this, Jeanne?'

Jeanne nodded.

'Perhaps you should make sure that the clothes he is wearing are his own. You are in no doubt about his identity, are you?'

'None at all. But these aren't his shoes. I'm the one who polishes them every day, so I should know. This morning he was wearing black shoes with double soles, the ones he uses for work.'

Maigret pulled the sheet off completely.

'Is this his raincoat?'

'Yes.'

'His suit?'

'That's his suit, yes. But that's not his tie. He would never wear anything so loud. This one is almost red.'

'Did your husband follow a regular routine?'

'Very much so. Ask my sister. In the morning he would catch the bus from the corner of the street to Juvisy station in time for the 8.17 train. He always travelled with Monsieur Beaudoin, our neighbour, who works in the Tax Office. At Gare de Lyon he took the Métro to Saint-Martin.'

The man from the Forensic Institute signalled to Maigret, who understood and led the two women to a table where the contents of the dead man's pockets had been laid out.

'I presume that you recognize these objects.'

There was a silver watch with a chain, a handkerchief without a monogram, an open packet of Gauloises, a lighter, a key and, next to the wallet, two small blue cardboard stubs.

It was these stubs that caught her eye immediately.

'Cinema tickets,' she said.

Maigret examined them and said:

'They're from a newsreel cinema in Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle. If I am reading the figures correctly, they are from today.'

'That's not possible. Did you hear that, Jeanne?'

'It does seem very odd,' the sister replied in a measured tone.

'Would you have a look at the contents of the wallet?'

She did so and frowned again.

'Louis didn't have this much money this morning.'

'Are you sure?'

'I check his wallet every morning to make sure that he has enough money. He never carries more than a thousand-franc note and two or three hundreds.'

'Could he have drawn some more?'

'It's not the end of the month.'

'When he gets home in the evening does he have the same amount in his pocket?'

'Less the price of his Métro ticket and his cigarettes. He has a season ticket for the train.'

She wasn't sure whether she could put the wallet in her handbag.

‘I suppose you will need to hold on to this?’

‘Until further notice, yes.’

‘What I don’t understand is why they changed his shoes and tie. And also why he wasn’t at work at the time it happened.’

Maigret didn’t pursue this. He got her to sign some official forms.

‘Are you going home?’

‘When can we have the body?’

’Probably in a day or two.’

‘Will there be a post-mortem?’

‘The examining magistrate might order one. It’s not certain.’

She looked at her watch.

‘We have a train in twenty minutes,’ she said to her sister.

And to Maigret:

‘Would you be able to drop us off at the station?’

‘Aren’t you going to wait for Monique?’

‘She can make her own way home.’

They had to make a special trip to Gare de Lyon and watched as the two almost identical figures mounted the stone steps.

‘Hard as nails, that one,’ grumbled Santoni. ‘That poor sucker can’t have had much of a fun life.’

‘Not with her, at least.’

‘What do you think about this business with the shoes? If they were new, we could assume that he’d bought them today.’

‘He wouldn’t have dared. You heard what she said.’

‘Or the flashy tie.’

‘I’m curious to see if the daughter is anything like her mother.’

They didn’t go straight back to Quai des Orfèvres but stopped off at a brasserie to have dinner. Maigret phoned his wife to tell her he didn’t know what time he would be home.

The restaurant also smelled of winter, with damp raincoats and hats hanging on every hook and the dark windows misted up.

When they arrived at the gate of police headquarters, the officer on duty told Maigret:

‘There was a young woman asking for you. Said she had an appointment. I sent her up.’

‘Has she been waiting long?’

‘About twenty minutes.’

The fog had turned into a fine drizzle, and the perpetually dust-covered steps of the main staircase were mottled with damp footprints. Most of the offices were empty. A crack of light was

visible only under a few of the doors.

'Want me to stay with you?'

Maigret nodded. Since Santoni had been there at the beginning of the inquiry, he might as well carry on.

A young woman in a distinctive light-blue hat was sitting on one of the chairs in the waiting room. The room was dimly lit. The office clerk was reading an evening paper.

'This one's for you, chief.'

'I know.'

And to the young woman:

'Mademoiselle Thouret? Would you follow me into my office?'

He lit the lamp with the green shade which illuminated the chair across from his, the one he sat her on, and noticed that she had been crying.

'My uncle told me that my father has died.'

He didn't say anything at first. Like her mother, she held a handkerchief in her hand, but hers was rolled into a ball, and she was kneading it with her fingers in the way that Maigret liked to knead putty when he was a child.

'I thought Mama was with you.'

'She went back to Juvisy.'

'How is she?'

What could he say to that?

'Your mother is a very brave woman.'

Monique was quite pretty. She didn't look a lot like her mother, though she shared her solid build. It was less obvious on her, as her flesh was younger and softer. She was wearing a well-tailored outfit, which surprised Maigret a little, as she certainly hadn't made it herself or bought it off the peg.

'What happened?' she finally asked, and at that moment a small teardrop appeared between her eyelashes.

'Your father was stabbed to death.'

'When?'

'This afternoon, between four thirty and a quarter to five.'

'How can this have happened?'

Why did he get the feeling that she wasn't being entirely sincere? The mother too had offered a sort of resistance, but, given her character, that was only to be expected. Basically, for Madame Thouret, being murdered in an alleyway off Boulevard Saint-Martin was a form of social disgrace. She had organized her life, not only

her own but that of her family, and a murder did not fit into her scheme of things. Not to mention that the dead man was wearing yellow shoes and a tie that was almost red!

Monique, for her part, was more circumspect, wary of answering too many questions and giving too much away.

'Did you know your father well?'

'Well . . . Of course . . .'

'Yes, of course you knew him as well as anyone knows their parents. What I'm getting at is: did you confide in him? Did you discuss your private life and your private thoughts with him?'

'He was a good father.'

'Was he happy?'

'I guess so.'

'Did you see him sometimes in Paris?'

'I don't understand. In the street, do you mean?'

'You both worked in Paris. I know that you didn't take the same train.'

'We didn't have the same office hours.'

'Did you ever meet up for lunch?'

'Sometimes, yes.'

'Often?'

'No. Very occasionally.'

'Did you go to his workplace?'

She hesitated.

'No. We met in a restaurant.'

'Did you phone him?'

'I don't remember ever doing that.'

'When was the last time you had lunch together?'

'Several months ago. Before the holidays.'

'Whereabouts?'

'At La Chope Alsacienne, a restaurant on Boulevard Sébastopol.'

'Did your mother know?'

'I suppose I told her. I can't remember.'

'Did your father have a cheery disposition?'

'Fairly cheery, I think.'

'Did he enjoy good health?'

'I never knew him to be ill.'

'Any friends?'

'We mainly socialized with my aunts and uncles.'

'Do you have a lot?'

‘Two aunts and two uncles.’

‘Do they all live in Juvisy?’

‘Yes. Not far from us. It was Uncle Albert, the husband of my Aunt Jeanne, who told me my father had died. My Aunt Céline lives a little further away.’

‘Are they both your mother’s sisters?’

‘Yes. And Uncle Julien, who is married to Aunt Céline, also works for the railways.’

‘Do you have a boyfriend, Mademoiselle Monique?’

She looked slightly put out.

‘I don’t think this is the moment to discuss that. Do I have to see my father?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘From what my uncle said, I thought that I had to identify the body.’

‘Your mother and aunt have taken care of that. However, if you wish—’

‘No. I guess I will see him back at the house.’

‘Just one more thing, Mademoiselle Monique. When you met your father in Paris, was he ever wearing yellow shoes?’

She didn’t answer straight away. To buy herself more time, she repeated:

‘Yellow shoes?’

‘Greenish-yellow, if you prefer. What back in my day were known as – if you pardon the expression – goose-poo shoes.’

‘I don’t recall.’

‘And you don’t recall him wearing a red tie?’

‘No.’

‘When was the last time you went to the cinema?’

‘I went yesterday afternoon.’

‘In Paris?’

‘In Juvisy.’

‘I won’t keep you any longer. I presume you have a train to catch.’

‘In thirty-five minutes.’

She looked at her wristwatch, got up and paused for a moment.

‘Good evening,’ she said finally.

‘Good evening, mademoiselle, and thank you.’

And Maigret escorted her to the door and closed it behind her.

2. The Spinster with the Large Nose

Without ever wondering why, Maigret had always had a certain predilection for that part of the Grands Boulevards lying between Place de la République and Rue Montmartre. It was his stamping ground, more or less. It was here, on Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, just a few hundred metres from the alleyway where Louis Thouret had met his end, that he went almost every week to the cinema with his wife. They would walk there, arm in arm, and afterwards go to the brasserie opposite to eat some sauerkraut.

Further along, towards the Opéra and La Madeleine, the boulevards were more spacious and elegant. Between Porte Saint-Martin and Place de la République the streets grew narrower and darker and were so teeming with human life that it sometimes made your head spin.

He had left home at 8.30 and had taken just a quarter of an hour, without hurrying on that grey morning, less damp but colder than the day before, to walk to the spot where Rue de Bondy crosses the boulevards, the intersection forming a small square in front of the Théâtre de la Renaissance. It was here, at Kaplan and Zanin's, according to Madame Thouret, that Louis Thouret had worked his whole life and was still working the day before.

The number Maigret had been given belonged to a very old, completely dilapidated building. All around the entrance door, which was wide open, were a number of black-and-white signs for a mattress maker, a typing school, a pen wholesaler (third on the left, staircase A), a bailiff and a qualified masseuse. The concierge, whose lodge opened on to the archway, was busy sorting the mail.

'Kaplan and Zanin's?' he asked her.

'The company closed down three years ago next month, my good man.'

‘Were you already working here?’

‘I’ll have been here twenty-six years this December.’

‘Did you know Louis Thouret?’

‘Why of course I knew Monsieur Louis! What has become of him? It must be four or five months since he last dropped by to say hello.’

‘He’s dead.’

She immediately stopped sorting the letters.

‘He always enjoyed such good health! What was it? Heart, I’ll bet, just like my husband . . .’

‘He was stabbed to death, yesterday afternoon, not far from here.’

‘I haven’t read the newspaper yet.’

As it happened, the papers had relayed news of the crime in a few short lines, as if it were a matter of no importance.

‘Who on earth would want to kill such a nice man?’

She herself was a fine woman, small but plucky.

‘For more than twenty years he walked past my lodge four times a day and he never failed to have a friendly word. When Monsieur Kaplan closed his business he was so crushed that . . .’

She had to dry her eyes and blow her nose.

‘Is Monsieur Kaplan still alive?’

‘I can give you his address if you like. He lives near Porte Maillot, Rue des Acacias. He’s a nice man too, but not in the same way. And old Monsieur Kaplan is probably still alive too.’

‘What did he sell?’

‘Don’t you know the firm?’

She was surprised that the whole world didn’t know about Kaplin and Zanin’s. Maigret said to her:

‘I’m from the police. I need to know everything there is to know about Monsieur Thouret.’

‘We called him Monsieur Louis. Everyone called him Monsieur Louis. Most people didn’t even know his surname. Could you just give me a moment . . .?’

And as she finished sorting the letters, she muttered to herself:

‘Monsieur Louis killed! Who would have thought! Such a nice man . . .’

Once she had put the envelopes into the pigeon-holes she threw a woollen shawl around her shoulders and half closed the damper on the stove.

‘I’ll show you.’

Standing under the archway, she explained:

‘Three years ago the building was scheduled to be demolished to make way for a cinema. The tenants at the time were given notice, and I myself made arrangements to go to live with my daughter in Nièvre. That’s why Monsieur Kaplan closed down the firm. Perhaps also because the business was struggling a bit. Young Monsieur Kaplan, Monsieur Max, as we called him, had very different ideas from his father. This way . . .’

Beyond the archway there was a courtyard, at the end of which rose up a huge building with a glass roof, which resembled a railway station concourse. On the rough-cast wall a few letters of the words Kaplan and Zanin were still visible.

‘The Zanins were long gone by the time I started working here, twenty-six years ago. At that time old Monsieur Kaplan ran the business himself. Children would turn and stare at him in the street because he looked like one of the Three Wise Men.’

The door wasn’t closed. The lock had been torn off. The whole place was dead now, but a few years earlier it had made up a part of Louis Thouret’s universe. It was difficult to tell exactly what it had been back in those days. It was a huge space with, way above their heads, a glass roof in which half the panes were now missing and the others too grimy to see through. Two galleries, one above the other, ran along the walls, as in a department store, and there were still traces on the wall of the shelving that had been removed.

‘Every time that he came to pay me a little visit—’

‘Did he come often?’

‘Maybe two or three times a month, always with a treat in his pocket . . . As I was saying, every time Monsieur Louis insisted on having a look round, and I could tell that his heart was heavy. I’ve seen as many as twenty girls in here doing the packing, even more at the end. In the run-up to Christmas it wasn’t unusual for them to be working well into the night. Monsieur Kaplan didn’t sell direct to the public but to bargain stores in the provinces as well as hawkers and street pedlars. There was so much merchandise you could hardly move, and Monsieur Louis was the only one who knew where everything was. Lord knows how much stuff they had: false beards, cardboard trumpets, coloured baubles to hang on the Christmas tree, paper streamers, carnival masks, seaside souvenirs.’

‘Was Monsieur Louis the foreman?’

‘Yes. He wore a grey overall. Over there in that corner on the right was Monsieur Kaplan’s glass-walled office. That’s young

Monsieur Kaplan – after his father had his first attack and stopped coming to the shop. He had a secretary, Mademoiselle Léone, and an old book-keeper, who worked in a cubbyhole on the first floor. No one had the slightest inkling what was coming. One fine day, in October or November, I can't quite remember, but I know it was already cold outside, Monsieur Max Kaplan gathered his staff together to announce that the firm was closing its doors and that he had found a buyer for the stock.

'At that time everyone was convinced that the building would be demolished the following year to make way, as I said, for a cinema.'

Maigret listened patiently and took in the surroundings, trying to picture what the place must have looked like in its heyday.

'The front part of the building is due to be demolished as well. All the tenants have received notice. Some have left already. Others have hung on and were right to do so, as it turns out, as they are still here. The problem is, as the building has been sold, the new owners are refusing to do any repairs. I don't know how many court cases are still dragging on. The bailiff is here almost every month. I've packed my bags twice already.'

'Do you know Madame Thouret?'

'I've never seen her. She lived out in the suburbs, in Juvisy . . .'

'She's still there.'

'You've met her? What is she like?'

Maigret simply grimaced in reply, and she got the hint:

'I thought as much. I could tell he wasn't happy at home. This was his life. That's why I always said that it hit him the hardest. Especially as he was at an age when it is difficult to make big changes.'

'How old was he?'

'Forty-five or -six.'

'Do you know what he did next?'

'He never spoke to me about it. He must have had a difficult time. He didn't come back here for quite a while. One time when I was doing my shopping, in a hurry as usual, I spotted him sitting on a bench. It gave me a shock. It was not somewhere you'd expect to see a man like him in the middle of the day, you see. I was going to say something to him. Then I thought that that might embarrass him, so I gave him a wide berth.'

'How long after the closure of the shop was this?'

It was colder here under the glass roof than out in the courtyard,

so she suggested:

'Wouldn't you like to come to the lodge to warm up? I'm not sure how much later it was. It wasn't in the spring, because there were no leaves on the trees. Probably towards the end of winter.'

'When was the next time you saw him?'

'A long time afterwards, in midsummer. What struck me the most was that he was wearing goose-poo shoes. Why are you looking at me like that?'

'No reason. Please go on.'

'That was out of character. I've only ever seen him in black shoes. He came into the lodge and placed a small parcel on the table, a white parcel with a red ribbon containing chocolates. He sat down on this chair. I made him a cup of coffee and I dashed out to buy a half-bottle of calvados at the corner of the street while he looked after the lodge.'

'What did he tell you?'

'Nothing in particular. He was just happy to be breathing the air of the place again, I could tell.'

'He made no mention of his new life?'

'I asked him if he was happy and he said yes. In any case, he wasn't working office hours, since this was the middle of the morning, around ten or eleven o'clock. Another time, he came in the afternoon and he was wearing a light-coloured tie. I teased him about it, told him it made him look younger. He wasn't the sort to take offence. Then we talked about his daughter: I've never seen her, but he showed me photos of her from when she was just a few months old. You don't often see a man so proud to be a father. He talked about her to everyone, carried photos of her in his pockets.'

They hadn't found any recent pictures of Monique in his pockets, just the photo of her as a baby.

'Is that all you know?'

'What do you expect me to know? I spend my life cooped up from morning to evening. Since Kaplan's closed down and the hairdresser on the first floor moved out, there has been hardly any life left in the place.'

'Did you talk to him about that?'

'Yes. We talked about everything under the sun: the tenants who were leaving, one after another, the court cases, the architects who would be here from time to time, working on the plans for this famous cinema while the place was slowly falling down around our

ears.’

She wasn’t bitter. Nevertheless, it was clear that she would be the very last to vacate the building.

‘How did it happen?’ she asked in turn. ‘Did he suffer?’

Neither Madame Thouret nor Monique had asked that question.

‘The doctor said not; he died instantly.’

‘Where did it happen?’

‘Not far from here, in a passageway off Boulevard Saint-Martin.’

‘By the jeweller’s?’

‘Yes. Someone must have followed him when it was getting dark and stuck a knife in his back.’

The previous evening and again this morning, Maigret had phoned the police forensic laboratory from his apartment. The knife was an ordinary one, of a common make, found in most hardware shops. It was new, and they hadn’t found any fingerprints on it.

‘Poor Monsieur Louis. He loved life so much!’

‘Was he a cheerful person?’

‘He wasn’t a sad person. I don’t know how to put this. He was friendly towards everyone. He was always kind and considerate. And he was modest too.’

‘Was he interested in women?’

‘Not at all! Though he didn’t lack the opportunity, working here. Apart from Monsieur Max and the old book-keeper, he was the only man in the firm, and the women who worked here as packers weren’t known for their virtue.’

‘Did he drink?’

‘A glass of wine, like everyone. The occasional liqueur with his coffee.’

‘Where did he have lunch?’

‘He didn’t leave the warehouse at midday; he brought his lunch with him, wrapped in an oilcloth. I can still see it now. He ate standing up at the corner of the table, then came out into the courtyard to smoke his pipe before going back to work. Only very occasionally would he go out, telling me he was meeting his daughter for lunch. That was in the later years, when she was a young woman and working in an office in Rue de Rivoli.

‘“Why don’t you bring her here, Monsieur Louis? I’d love to see her.”

‘“One of these days,” he promised.

‘But he never did. I don’t know why.’

‘Have you lost touch with Mademoiselle Léone?’

‘No, I have her address too. She lives with her mother. She doesn’t work in an office any more, she’s opened a shop in Rue de Clignancourt, in Montmartre. She may be able to tell you more than I can. He also went to see her. One time, when I was talking about her, he told me that she sold baby clothes and articles. That’s funny.’

‘What’s funny?’

‘That she should be selling things for babies.’

People started popping in to collect their mail and they gave Maigret a suspicious glance, no doubt assuming that he was there to evict them.

‘Thank you. I will be back again, no doubt.’

‘You have no idea who did it?’

‘None at all,’ he admitted frankly.

‘Did they steal his wallet?’

‘No. Nor his watch.’

‘Then they must have mistaken him for someone else.’

Rue de Clignancourt was right on the other side of town. He went into a small bar and made for the telephone booth.

‘Who’s this?’

‘Janvier, chief.’

‘Anything new?’

‘The men are out, following the orders you left.’

He was referring to five inspectors who had each been assigned a different district and were visiting all the hardware shops. As for Santoni, Maigret had instructed him to find out more about Monique Thouret, just on the off chance. He would now be in Rue de Rivoli, hanging round the offices of Geber and Bachelier’s debt-collection agency.

If Madame Thouret had had a telephone out in Juvisy, he would have called her to ask whether her husband had continued to take his lunch with him every day, wrapped in a black oilcloth.

‘Could you send the car round?’

‘Where are you?’

‘Rue de Bondy. I’ll be outside the Renaissance.’

He almost gave Janvier, who was free that day, the task of questioning the shopkeepers on Boulevard Saint-Martin. Inspector Neveu was on the case now, but in this type of work, with its

element of chance, you could never have too many people helping out. But he decided against it, largely because he wanted to check out the area again himself.

'Any other orders?'

'Give the newspapers a photo. Make sure that they go on treating it as a minor story.'

'Got it. I'm sending the car now.'

Since the concierge had mentioned calvados, and because it was really quite cold, he ordered a glass. Then, his hands in his pockets, he crossed the boulevard and went to have a quick look at the alleyway where Monsieur Louis had been killed.

The announcement of the crime had been so inconspicuous that there were no curious passers-by stopping to see if there were any traces of blood still on the paving stones.

He stood for a while in front of one of the windows of the jeweller's; he could see five or six sales staff inside. They didn't sell high-quality jewellery. Most of the items on display had a label next to them saying 'special offer'. The window was full of merchandise: wedding rings, fake diamonds, some real ones too perhaps, alarm-clocks, watches and rather tasteless pendulum clocks.

A little old man was watching Maigret from the inside, no doubt taking him for a potential customer; he came to the door, a smile on his lips, with the intention of inviting him in. The inspector merely walked away. A few moments later, he was climbing into the police car.

'Rue de Clignancourt.'

It was a less noisy area, but still predominantly lower-class. Mademoiselle Léone's shop, called 'Le Bébé Rose', was so tucked away between a horse-meat butcher and a restaurant frequented by cab-drivers that only those in the know would be aware it was there.

He almost had a shock when he went in, because the woman who came out from the back of the shop, where there was an old lady sitting in an armchair with a cat on her knees, didn't correspond to the image he had formed in his head of Kaplan's secretary. In what way? He wasn't sure. She was probably wearing felt slippers, because her footsteps made no sound, a bit like a nun. And also like a nun, she seemed to walk without moving her body.

She gave a vague smile, a smile that was not confined to her lips but was spread across her face, which was soft and unassuming.

Wasn't it strange that she was called Léone? Stranger still that she had a large, round nose of the kind that you see on sleepy old lions in the zoo.

'What can I do for you, sir?'

She was dressed in black. Her face and hands were washed-out, limp. A large stove in the back room was emitting comforting waves of warmth, and all over the counter and the shelves there were delicate baby clothes, socks decorated with blue or pink ribbons, bonnets and christening robes.

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire.'

'Oh?'

'One of your former colleagues, Louis Thouret, was killed yesterday.'

Of all of them, she had the strongest reaction to the news, even though she didn't cry, didn't look for a handkerchief, didn't pinch her lips. Rather, the sudden shock froze her to the spot; you would have sworn her heart stopped beating for a moment. And he saw her already pale lips become as white as the baby clothes all around.

'Forgive me for announcing that so bluntly . . .'

She shook her head to tell him it didn't matter. The old lady in the other room had stirred slightly.

'In order to find his killer I need to gather as much information as I can about him . . .'

She nodded but still didn't say a word.

'I believe you knew him well . . .'

And it was as if her face lit up for an instant.

'How did it happen?' she asked finally, with a catch in her voice.

She must already have been ugly as a little girl and always known it. She looked towards the back room and murmured:

'Would you like to take a seat?'

'I think your mother . . .'

'We can speak in front of Mother. She is completely deaf. She likes to have some company.'

He didn't dare admit that he was afraid of suffocating in this airless room, where the two women spent their life in a state of near-immobility.

Léone was ageless. She was probably in her fifties, possibly late fifties. Her mother seemed to be at least eighty and she looked at the inspector with bright, bird-like eyes. It wasn't from her that

Léone had inherited her large nose but from her father, a photograph of whom hung on the wall.

'I've just been to see the concierge in Rue de Bondy.'

'It must have come as a shock to her.'

'Yes. She was very fond of him.'

'Everyone was fond of him.'

Her face coloured a little as she said this.

'He was such a nice man,' she added hastily.

'You saw him again often, is that right?'

'He came to see me a few times. I wouldn't exactly say "often". He was very busy, and I live a long way out.'

'Do you know what he has been doing in the last couple of years?'

'I never asked him. He seemed to be doing well. I suppose he was running his own business, as he didn't seem to keep office hours.'

'Did he ever talk to you about people he was associated with?'

'We mainly talked about Rue de Bondy, Kaplan's, Monsieur Max, inventories. It used to be a major operation every year – we had over a thousand different items in our catalogue.'

She hesitated.

'I suppose you must have seen his wife?'

'Yesterday evening, yes.'

'What did she say?'

'She couldn't understand why her husband was wearing yellow shoes when he died. She claimed that the killer must have put them on him.'

Like the concierge, she too had noticed the shoes.

'No, he often wore them.'

'Even when he was still working in Rue de Bondy?'

'Only afterwards. Quite a long time afterwards.'

'What do you mean by "quite a long time"?'

'Maybe a year.'

'Did it surprise you to see him in these yellow shoes?'

'Yes. It was different from how he normally dressed.'

'What did you think?'

'That he had changed.'

'Really changed?'

'He wasn't the same at all. His sense of humour was different. He would burst out in peals of laughter.'

'He didn't laugh before?'

‘Not in that way. There was something new in his life.’

‘A woman?’

It was cruel, but the question had to be asked.

‘Perhaps.’

‘Did he confide in you?’

‘No.’

‘Did he ever make a pass at you?’

She protested vehemently:

‘Never! I swear! I’m sure the thought never even crossed his mind.’

The cat had abandoned the old lady’s lap to settle on Maigret’s knees.

‘Leave it,’ he said as she made to shoo it off.

He didn’t dare smoke his pipe.

‘I suppose it must have been a cruel blow for all of you, when Monsieur Kaplan announced that he was closing the business?’

‘It was hard, yes.’

‘For Louis Thouret especially?’

‘Monsieur Louis was the most attached to the company. He was so used to it. Imagine, he joined the firm as a messenger boy at the age of fourteen.’

‘Where did he come from?’

‘Belleville. From what I heard, his mother was a widow, and she was the one who brought him in one day to introduce him to old Monsieur Kaplan. He was still in short trousers. He hardly ever went to school.’

‘Is his mother dead?’

‘She died a long time ago.’

Why did Maigret have the feeling that she was hiding something? She spoke openly, looked him in the eye, yet he still sensed a slight shift, as furtive as her padded footsteps.

‘I believe he had trouble finding another position.’

‘Who said that?’

‘It was a conclusion I drew from what the concierge told me.’

‘It is always tricky to find a job when you’re past forty, especially when you have no particular skills. I myself—’

‘You looked for work?’

‘Only for a few weeks.’

‘And Monsieur Louis?’

‘He looked for a lot longer.’

‘Are you guessing or do you know for a fact?’

‘I know.’

‘Did he come to see you at this time?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you help him out?’

He was certain now: Léone was someone who had savings.

‘Why are you asking me about that?’

‘Because unless I have a clear idea of the man he was during the last few years I will have no chance of catching his murderer.’

‘Yes, I did,’ she replied after a few moments’ thought. ‘I will tell you everything, but I’d like this to remain between us. Above all, his wife mustn’t find out. She is very proud.’

‘Do you know her?’

‘He told me. His brothers-in-law have important jobs and have both had their own houses built.’

‘Him too.’

‘He had to because his wife wanted it. She was the one who demanded they live in Juvisy, like her two sisters.’

Her voice was different now, and Maigret could sense some deep resentment that had been festering for a long time.

‘Was he afraid of his wife?’

‘He never wanted to upset anyone. When we all lost our jobs, a few weeks before Christmas, he refused to let it spoil his family celebrations.’

‘He didn’t tell them? He let them believe that he was still working in Rue de Bondy?’

‘He was hoping that he would find a new position in a few days, then a few weeks. Only, there was the house.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘He was paying for it through a mortgage, and I heard that it was a serious matter if he missed a payment on the date it was due.’

‘Who did he borrow the money from?’

‘Monsieur Saimbron and me.’

‘Who is Monsieur Saimbron?’

‘The book-keeper. He’s not working any more. He lives on his own in rooms on Quai de la Mégisserie.’

‘Does he have money?’

‘He is very poor.’

‘But the two of you lent money to Monsieur Louis?’

‘Yes. Otherwise their house would have been put up for sale and

they would have been thrown out into the street.'

'Why didn't he ask Monsieur Kaplan?'

'Because Monsieur Kaplan wouldn't have given him anything. That's how he was. When he announced that he was shutting up shop he gave us all an envelope containing three months' salary. Monsieur Louis didn't dare keep the money on his person, because his wife would have realized.'

'She searched his wallet?'

'I don't know. Probably. I looked after his money for him, and each month he would take out the equivalent of his salary. Then, when the money ran out . . .'

'I understand.'

'He paid me back.'

'How much time later?'

'Eight or nine months. Nearly a year.'

'Was it a while before you saw him again?'

'More or less from February to August.'

'Were you worried?'

'No. I knew he'd come back. Even after he repaid all the money . . .'

'Did he tell you that he had found a job?'

'He told me he was working.'

'Was he still wearing the yellow shoes?'

'Yes. He came back from time to time. Each time he brought me a present and some sweets for Mother.'

Maybe that was why the old lady was looking at Maigret with a somewhat disappointed expression. People who came to visit her normally brought sweets, whereas Maigret had turned up empty-handed. He promised himself that, if he had to return any time, he would remember to bring some sweets himself.

'He never mentioned any names to you?'

'What sort of names?'

'I don't know. Employers, friends, colleagues . . .'

'No.'

'He didn't mention any particular part of Paris?'

'He only ever mentioned Rue de Bondy. He went back there several times. He felt bitter that they still hadn't demolished the building.

'"We could have stayed there another year!" he would sigh.'

A bell tinkled at the entrance, and Léone craned her neck in what

must have been an habitual movement for her to see who had come into the shop. Maigret stood up.

'I won't bother you any longer.'

'You'll always be welcome.'

There was a pregnant woman standing at the counter. He picked up his hat and headed for the door.

'Thank you.'

The two women watched him over the piles of white and pink baby clothes and linen as he climbed back inside the car.

'Where are we going, chief?'

It was eleven o'clock in the morning.

'Stop at the first bar.'

'There's one right next to the shop.'

A certain self-consciousness prevented him from going into that one, in full view of Léone.

'Go round the corner.'

He wanted to telephone Monsieur Kaplan and look up the exact address of Monsieur Saimbron, Quai de la Mégisserie, in the phone book.

And while he was there, since he had started the day with a calvados, he drank another one.

3. The Boiled Egg

Maigret ate lunch alone in his corner of the Brasserie Dauphine. This was significant, as he wasn't so busy at work that he couldn't go home for lunch. As usual, there were a number of inspectors from headquarters in there, drinking aperitifs, and they followed him with their eyes as he made his way to his usual table next to one of the windows, from which he could watch the Seine flowing by.

The inspectors, who weren't even part of his squad, merely exchanged glances without saying a word. Whenever Maigret walked with this heavy tread and had this faraway look and demeanour that some mistook for a bad mood, everyone at the Police Judiciaire knew what that meant. And for all they were smiling, they nevertheless felt a certain respect, because sooner or later it ended the same way: a man – or a woman – confessing to their crime.

'Would you recommend the veal stew?'

'Of course, Monsieur Maigret.'

Maigret believed him, but nevertheless he was giving the waiter the same sort of stare he might give a suspect.

'Beer, sir?'

'No, a half-bottle of red.'

Purely to be contrary. If he had been offered wine, he would have asked for beer.

He hadn't set foot in the office yet today. He had just come from Saimbron's lodging in Quai de la Mégisserie, and the visit had left him feeling a bit queasy.

First of all, he had rung Max Kaplan's address, only to be told that he was away at his villa in Antibes and no, they didn't know when he would be returning to Paris.

The entrance door to the building on Quai de la Mégisserie was squashed between two shops that sold birds: there were birdcages spilling out over a large part of the pavement.

'Monsieur Saimbron?' he had asked the concierge.

'Right at the top. You can't miss it.'

He looked for a lift but there wasn't one, so he had to mount six flights of stairs on foot. It was an old building, and the walls were dark and dirty. The landing at the top was illuminated by a skylight, and on the left, next to the door, hung a red and black cord like you see on certain dressing gowns. He pulled it. This produced a pathetic little sound on the other side of the door. Then he heard some light footsteps; the door opened, and he saw an almost ghostly face, long, pale and bony, with a few days' worth of grey stubble and weeping eyes.

'Monsieur Saimbron?'

'That's me. Please come in.'

This welcome, short though it was, was interrupted by a fit of dry coughing.

'I'm sorry. It's my bronchitis . . .'

There was a stale, sickly smell pervading the room. Maigret could hear the hiss of a gas ring, a pan of water boiling.

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret of the Police Judiciaire . . .'

'Yes. I thought you'd come. You or one of your colleagues.'

The table was covered by a leaf-patterned tablecloth of the sort you don't see any more except at flea markets. On it lay a newspaper open at the page where Louis Thouret's death was announced in a few short lines.

'You were about to have lunch?'

Next to the newspaper were a plate, a glass of water with a dash of wine in it and a chunk of bread.

'It can wait.'

'Please carry on as if I weren't here.'

'My egg will be hard-boiled by now anyway.'

The old man decided to go and get it. The hiss of the gas ring ceased.

'Sit down, inspector. I'd advise you to take your coat off. I have to keep this place very hot, because of my old bronchial tubes.'

He must have been almost the same age as Mademoiselle Léone's mother, but he had no one to take care of him. He probably never received any visitors either in these rooms, whose only hint of

luxury was a view over the Seine and, beyond, the Palais de Justice and the flower market.

'Has it been a while since you last saw Monsieur Louis?'

The conversation had lasted half an hour, because of the frequent coughing fits and also because Monsieur Saimbron ate his egg with unbelievable slowness.

And what did Maigret get out of it in the end? Nothing he hadn't learned already from the concierge or Léone.

For Saimbron too the closure of Kaplan's had been a disaster, and he didn't even try to find another job. He had a bit of money saved up. For years and years he had believed that it would be enough to keep him in his retirement. But because of currency devaluations he only had enough, literally, to fend off starvation; that boiled egg was probably his only solid nourishment of the day.

'Luckily I've lived here for forty years!'

He was an old man, without children or any family.

When Louis Thouret had come to see him he had had no hesitation in lending him the money he asked for.

'He told me it was a matter of life or death, and I could see he was telling the truth.'

Mademoiselle Léone had also lent him money.

'He paid it back a few months later.'

But during those months did it ever cross his mind that Monsieur Louis might never return? And in that case, how would Monsieur Saimbron have paid for his daily egg?

'Did he come to see you often?'

'Two or three times. The first time was when he brought me my money. He gave me a meerschaum pipe as a present.'

He went to get it from a shelf. No doubt he had to be sparing with tobacco too.

'How long since you last saw him?'

'The last time was three weeks ago, on a bench in Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle.'

Was the old book-keeper drawn back to the neighbourhood where he had worked most of his life? Did he make the occasional pilgrimage there?

'Did you speak to him?'

'I sat down next to him. He offered to buy me a drink in a nearby café, but I declined. The sun was shining. We chatted and watched the world go by.'

‘Was he wearing yellow shoes?’

‘I didn’t notice his shoes. That detail escaped me.’

‘Did he tell you what he was doing?’

Monsieur Saimbron shook his head. The same discretion as Mademoiselle Léone. Maigret felt he understood them both. He was beginning to grow attached to Monsieur Louis, even though all he had seen of him was his astonished expression at the moment he died.

‘How was he when you left him?’

‘I had the impression that someone was hanging around the bench and making signals to my companion.’

‘A man?’

‘Yes, a middle-aged man.’

‘What was he like?’

‘The sort of man you see sitting on benches in this neighbourhood. In the end he sat down next to us, without saying a word. I left. When I turned round, I saw the two of them deep in conversation.’

‘Friendly?’

‘They didn’t seem to be arguing.’

That was it. Maigret had gone back downstairs, decided against returning home and ended up in his favourite corner of the Brasserie Dauphine.

It was a grey day. The Seine was dull and lustreless. He had another glass of calvados with his coffee then went to his office, where he found a stack of paperwork waiting for him. A little later Coméliau, the examining magistrate, called him on the telephone.

‘What do you make of this Thouret affair? The public prosecutor put me on the case this morning and told me you were handling it. Just a straightforward violent mugging, I suppose?’

Maigret responded with a grunt that expressed neither yes nor no.

‘The family are asking for the body. I didn’t want to do anything before checking with you first. Do you still need it?’

‘Has Doctor Paul examined it?’

‘He has just given me his report over the telephone. He will send me the written version this evening. The knife penetrated the left ventricle, and death was virtually instantaneous.’

‘No other wounds or signs of a struggle?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Then I see no reason why the family can’t reclaim the body. I

would simply like the clothes to be sent to the laboratory.'

'OK. Keep me posted.'

Coméliau didn't usually handle things this gently. It was probably due to the fact that the press had hardly mentioned the case at all and he had written it off as a violent mugging. He wasn't interested in that; no one was.

Maigret poked the stove, filled his pipe and for nearly an hour occupied himself with administrative matters: writing notes on reports, signing off others, making the occasional humdrum phone call.

'Can I come in, chief?'

It was Santoni, dressed to the nines as usual and, also as usual, exuding a scent of hair oil that would lead his colleagues to remark:

'You stink like a tart.'

Santoni was twitching with excitement.

'I think I'm on to something.'

Maigret didn't react but looked at him with his large, cloudy eyes.

'The first thing is that the office where the girl works, Geber and Bachelier's, is a debt-collection agency. Just small potatoes, really. They buy up bad debts at a knock-down price then squeeze the debtors. It's not so much office work as home visits and arm-twisting. The Thouret girl only works in Rue de Rivoli in the morning; every afternoon she visits the debtors in their homes.'

'I see.'

'Hard-up people, mainly, the ones who are most easily intimidated and end up coughing up. I didn't see the managers. I waited outside the office entrance at midday, making sure the daughter didn't see me, and spoke to another one of the employees, a woman not in the first flush of youth, who obviously resented her younger colleague.'

'And . . .?'

'Our Monique has a boyfriend.'

'Do you know his name?'

'I'm getting there, chief. They've known each other about four months and meet every day for lunch in a cheap restaurant on Boulevard Sébastopol. He is young, only nineteen, and works as a sales assistant in a large bookshop on Boulevard Saint-Michel.'

Maigret was playing with the pipes arranged on his desk. Even though his present one wasn't yet finished, he started to fill another

one.

'The boy's name is Albert Jorisse. I wanted to see what he looked like so I went along to the restaurant. It was packed. I finally spotted Monique at a table, but she was on her own. I sat down in another corner and had a fairly disgusting meal. The girl seemed nervous and kept glancing towards the door.'

'He didn't turn up?'

'No. She spun out her lunch as long as she could. In these cheap joints they like to serve you fast and usher you out as soon as possible. In the end she had to go and she spent another quarter of an hour pacing up and down outside on the pavement.'

'Then?'

'She was so preoccupied with her boyfriend not turning up that she didn't notice me. She headed off towards Boulevard Saint-Michel, and I followed her. You probably know the bookshop, the one on the corner with boxes of books outside on the pavement.'

'I know it.'

'She went inside and spoke to one of the sales assistants, who directed her to the cashier. I could see her being very insistent, but she grew increasingly despondent. Finally, she left.'

'Didn't you follow her?'

'I thought it would be more useful to concentrate on the young man. I went into the bookshop myself and asked the manager if he knew a certain Albert Jorisse. He told me he did, but that he worked only in the morning. When I looked surprised he explained that that was normal there, as they mainly employed students, who weren't free to work an entire day.'

'Jorisse is a student?'

'Hold on. I wanted to know how long he had been at the bookshop. He had to look it up. He has been working there for just over a year. At the start he worked full days. Then, about three months ago, he announced that he would be pursuing studies in Law and could only come into the shop in the mornings.'

'Do you have his address?'

'He lives with his parents on Avenue de Châtillon, almost opposite the Montrouge church. There's more. Albert Jorisse didn't turn up for work today, something that has happened only two or three times this year, and on previous occasions he has always phoned in to tell them. Not today.'

'Was he at work yesterday?'

‘Yes. I thought you would find all this interesting, so I took a taxi to Avenue de Châtillon. His parents are ordinary, decent people who live in a very well-kept apartment on the third floor. The mother takes in ironing.’

‘Did you tell them that you were from the police?’

‘No. I told them I was a friend of their son and that I needed to see him urgently.’

‘Did she direct you to the bookshop?’

‘You guessed it. She doesn’t know a thing. He left this morning at quarter past eight as usual. She knew nothing about this so-called Law course. Her husband works for a fabric wholesaler on Rue des Victoires. They aren’t rich enough to pay for their son to study.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I made out that I must have mistaken him for another Jorisse. I asked them if they had a photo of their son. She showed me one on the sideboard in the dining room. She’s a good woman and doesn’t suspect a thing. All she was interested in was making sure her iron didn’t get cold and not burning the linen. I made a bit more small talk . . .’

Maigret said nothing but didn’t appear very enthusiastic. It was obvious that Santoni hadn’t been in his squad for long. Everything he said – and even the manner in which he said it – was out of keeping with the thinking of Maigret and his colleagues.

‘On the way out, when she wasn’t looking . . .’

He held something out.

‘Hand it over.’

As if he didn’t know that Santoni had pinched the photo. It showed a thin, nervous-looking young man with very long hair, the sort who was attractive to women and was aware of it.

‘Is that it?’

‘We’ll see if he returns home tonight, shall we?’

Maigret sighed.

‘We’ll see, yes.’

‘Aren’t you pleased?’

‘Of course I am.’

What was the use? Santoni would learn, as others had learned. It was always the same when they took on an inspector from another squad.

‘I didn’t follow the girl because I know where I can find her. Every day at five thirty, quarter to six at the latest, she goes back to

the office to drop off the money she has collected and to make her report. Do you want me to go there?'

Maigret hesitated and almost told him not to bother any more. But he realized that that would be unfair, as the inspector had done his best.

'Make sure that she comes back to the office, then catches her train home.'

'Maybe her lover will meet her there?'

'Maybe. What time does he normally go home to his parents?'

'They have dinner at seven o'clock. He is always there, even if he has to go out in the evening.'

'I don't suppose they have a telephone?'

'No.'

'What about their concierge?'

'I don't think so. It's not the sort of place that has telephones. But I'll check.'

He consulted the phone book that was arranged by streets.

'Go there around seven thirty and question the concierge. Leave the photo with me.'

Since Santoni had taken it, he might as well hold on to it. It might come in useful.

'Will you be here in the office?'

'I don't know where I'll be, but stay in contact with headquarters.'

'What shall I do until then? I've got nearly two hours before I need to go to Rue de Rivoli.'

'Go down to the Hotel Agency. Maybe they have a form in the name of Louis Thouret.'

'You think he had a room in town?'

'Where do you think he left his yellow shoes and bright tie when he went home?'

'That's true.'

It had been a good two hours since the photograph of Monsieur Louis had appeared in the afternoon papers. It was just a small photo in the corner of the page, with the words:

> Louis Thouret, who was murdered yesterday afternoon in an alleyway off Boulevard Saint-Martin. The police are following a lead.

It wasn't true, but the papers always say that. It was strange, come to think of it, that the inspector hadn't received a single telephone

call. In fact, it was because he expected to receive some that he had returned to his office, where he was now killing time dealing with his paperwork. Almost always in cases like this people believe, rightly or wrongly, that they recognize the victim. Or else they have seen a suspect hanging around the location of the crime. Most of these claims turn out to be false on further investigation. But sometimes they can also lead to the truth.

For three years, Monsieur Louis, as his former colleagues and the concierge at Rue de Bondy called him, had been leaving Juvisy on the same train every morning, with his lunch wrapped in an oilcloth, as he had done all his life.

What became of him when he got off the train at Gare de Lyon? That remained a mystery. Except for those first few months, when, so it seemed, he was desperately seeking a new job. Along with many others, he would have queued up in front of the newspaper offices to lay his hands on addresses supplied in the job ads. Maybe he even tried selling vacuum cleaners door to door?

He had had no luck, since he had to resort to borrowing money from Mademoiselle Léone and the old book-keeper.

After this, for several months, he had disappeared from sight. Not only did he have to find the equivalent of his salary from Kaplan's every month, he also had to raise the funds to pay back his two lenders.

During this whole time, he went home every evening as if everything were normal, acting like a man who had just put in a day's work.

His wife hadn't suspected a thing. Neither had his daughter. Nor his sisters-in-law. Nor his two brothers-in-law, who both worked for the railways.

Then one fine day he had turned up in Rue de Clignancourt with the money he owed Mademoiselle Léone, as well as a present for her and some sweets for her old mother.

Not to mention the yellow shoes on his feet!

Were these yellow shoes part of the reason Maigret was so interested in this man? He would never admit it, but for years he too had longed to wear goose-poo shoes. They were fashionable at the time, along with those very short beige raincoats popularly known as bum-freezers.

Once, early in his marriage, he had decided to buy himself a pair of yellow shoes and he had almost blushed when he went into the

shoe shop. As it happened, it was on Boulevard Saint-Martin, opposite the Théâtre de l'Ambigu. He hadn't dared wear them straight away, and when he had unwrapped them in front of Madame Maigret she had looked at him and burst out laughing.

'You're not thinking of wearing them, are you?'

He never did wear them. She was the one who had taken them back to the shop, making out that they pinched his feet.

Louis Thouret had bought himself some yellow shoes too, and in Maigret's eyes that was a significant detail.

Firstly, it symbolized liberation; he would swear to it. Whenever he had these famous shoes on his feet he would have felt like a free man. It meant that, until he had to change back into his black shoes, his wife, sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law had no hold over him.

It had another meaning. The day when Maigret had bought his shoes, the detective chief inspector of the Saint-Georges precinct, where he was working at the time, had come to tell him that he had been given a pay-rise of ten francs a month; and ten francs in those days was a tidy sum.

Monsieur Louis too must have been feeling flush. He had given the old book-keeper a meerschaum pipe and paid back the two people who believed in him. Now he could come to visit them again, especially Mademoiselle Léone. Now he could visit the concierge in Rue de Bondy again too.

Why did he not talk to them about what he was doing?

By chance the concierge had spotted him on a bench in Boulevard Saint-Martin one morning at eleven o'clock.

She hadn't spoken to him but made a detour so that he wouldn't see her. Maigret understood. What had bothered her was the bench. You don't expect to find a man like Monsieur Louis, who had worked ten hours a day all his life, lazing around on a bench! Not on a Sunday, or at the end of the working day, let alone at eleven in the morning, when all the offices and shops were in full swing.

And Monsieur Saimbron had also spotted his former colleague sitting on a bench, in Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle this time, just a stone's throw from Boulevard Saint-Martin and Rue de Bondy.

In the afternoon, Monsieur Saimbron hadn't shown the same discretion as the concierge. Or maybe Louis Thouret had spotted him first?

Was the former warehouseman there to meet someone? Who was

that man who had hung around the bench as if waiting for a signal to come and sit down?

Monsieur Saimbron didn't describe him; he mustn't have paid him much attention. But what he said was revealing nonetheless: 'the sort of man you see sitting on benches in this neighbourhood'. One of those people with no fixed employment who sit on benches on the boulevards for hours, vaguely watching the world go by. The ones you see in the Saint-Martin area weren't like those you see in some squares and gardens, in Parc Montsouris, for ex-ample, who are usually residents of the neighbourhood.

Residents don't go to Boulevard Saint-Martin to sit down, or if they do, they sit at the terrace of a café.

On the one hand there were the yellow shoes; on the other, the bench. And in Maigret's mind these two details didn't fit together.

Finally, and most importantly of all, there was the fact that Louis, at around 4.30 on a grey, rainy day, went down an alleyway where he had apparently no business, that someone followed him without a sound and stuck a knife between his shoulder-blades, less than ten metres from the crowded pavement of the boulevard.

The photograph had been printed, but no one had rung in. Maigret carried on annotating reports and signing forms. Outside the gloom was deepening, sliding into full darkness. He had to turn on the lamp and, when he noticed by the mantelpiece clock that it was three o'clock, he got up and fetched his large overcoat from the hook.

Before setting off, he opened the door to the inspectors' room.

'I'll be back in an hour or two.'

It wasn't worth bothering with the car. At the end of the street he hopped on the back of a bus and then got off a few minutes later at the intersection of Boulevard Sébastopol and the Grands Boulevards.

The previous day at the same time Louis Thouret was still alive and wandering around the neighbourhood too with time on his hands before he had to exchange his yellow shoes for his black ones and head off to Gare de Lyon to catch his train for Juvisy.

The streets were extremely busy. At every corner the crowds clustered together, waiting for the signal to cross the road. 'That must have been the bench,' he thought, spotting a bench on the pavement opposite Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle.

There was no one sitting there, but from here he could see a

crumpled, greasy piece of paper that he was sure must have contained some slices of salami.

Working girls were plying the corner of Rue Saint-Martin. There were a few others in a small bar where four men were playing cards at a round table.

At the counter he recognized a familiar silhouette, that of Inspector Neveu. He stopped and waited for him, and one of the women thought he had stopped there for her; he absently shook his head at her.

As Neveu was here, he must have questioned them already. He was from the neighbourhood and knew them all.

'How's it going?' Maigret asked him as he came out of the bar.

'You came along too?'

'Just to have a look round.'

'I've been tramping the streets since eight this morning. I must have spoken to five hundred people.'

'Did you find the place where he had lunch?'

'How did you guess?'

'I was sure he must have had his midday meal here-abouts, and he was the sort of man who likes to frequent the same place.'

'Over there,' said Neveu, pointing out a quiet-looking restaurant. 'He had his own napkin and ring.'

'What did they have to say?'

'The waitress who served him – because he sat at her table every day, at the back, near the counter – is a tall, dark-haired mare with hairs on her chin. Do you know what she called him?'

As if Maigret could possibly know!

'Her little man . . . That's what she told me.

'"So, my little man, what will it be today?"

'She said he really liked it. He talked to her about the weather, rain or shine. He never made a pass at her.

'The waitresses in that restaurant get two hours off between the end of lunch and setting up for dinner.

'It turns out that she'd often see Monsieur Louis sitting on the bench when she came out at three o'clock. Each time, she waved at him.

'One day, she shouted out:

'"Hey there, my little man, make sure you don't overdo it!"

'He replied that he worked nights.'

'Did she believe him?'

‘Yes. She seemed to worship him.’

‘Has she read the paper?’

‘No. She found out from me that he had been killed. She couldn’t credit it.

‘It’s not an expensive restaurant, but it’s not one of those fixed-price joints either. Every lunchtime, Monsieur Louis would treat himself to a decent half-bottle of wine.’

‘Did anyone else in the neighbourhood see him?’

‘About ten people so far. One of the girls on the corner of the street bumped into him almost every day. The first time she tried to proposition him, but he politely declined, without making an issue out of it, and so every time she met him after that she would say:

‘“So, is today the day?”

‘They both had a laugh about it. When she was going off with a customer, she would give him a wink.’

‘He never went with any of them?’

‘No.’

‘They never saw him with a woman?’

‘They didn’t, but one of the salesmen in the jewellery shop did.’

‘The shop next to where he was killed?’

‘Yes. When I showed his photo to the sales staff, one of them recognized him.

‘“That’s the fellow who bought a ring here last week!” he exclaimed.’

‘Was Monsieur Louis with a young woman?’

‘Not particularly young. The sales assistant didn’t pay that much attention to her, because he thought that they were married. All he noticed was that she wore a silver fox stole around her neck and a necklace with a pendant in the form of a four-leaf clover.

‘“We sell the same type here.”’

‘Was it an expensive piece?’

‘Gold-plated with a fake diamond.’

‘Did they say anything in front of him?’

‘They spoke to each other like a married couple. He didn’t remember what they said. Nothing interesting.’

‘Would he recognize her?’

‘He’s not sure. She was dressed in black and wore gloves. She almost left one behind on the counter after she had tried on the ring. It was Monsieur Louis who came back for it. She waited for him by the door. She is taller than him. When they were outside, he

took her arm, and they headed off towards Place de la République.'

'Anything else?'

'These things take time. I started further up, towards Rue Montmartre, but I drew a blank there. I almost forgot: you know the waffle-makers on Rue de la Lune?'

They cooked their waffles almost in the open air, in open-fronted shops, like at the fair, and you caught a whiff of that sugary smell as soon as you turned the corner.

'They remembered him. He often went there to buy some waffles, always three at a time, but he didn't eat them there; instead, he took them away.'

The waffles were enormous. The sign claimed that they were the biggest in Paris. It was unlikely that Monsieur Louis would have been able to polish off three of them after eating a large lunch. And he wasn't the sort of man who would eat them sitting on a bench. Did he share them with the ring woman? If so, she can't have lived far away.

But maybe the waffles were intended for the companion that Monsieur Saimbron had spotted.

'Shall I carry on?'

'Of course.'

That gave Maigret a little pang. He would have loved to do it himself, just as when he was a humble inspector.

'Where are you off to, chief?'

'Down the road to have another look.'

He wasn't hoping for anything in particular. Simply, as he was no more than a hundred metres away, he wanted to see the place where Monsieur Louis was killed one more time. It was about the same time of day. Today, there was no mist. The alleyway was completely dark nonetheless, and it was even harder to see anything against the glare of the lights in the jeweller's shop.

Because of the waffles and the memories of fairgrounds that came back to him, Maigret wondered for a moment whether Thouret went into the alley to answer the call of nature, but given that there was a urinal on the street just opposite, that explanation seemed fairly unlikely.

'If only I could find the woman!' sighed Neveu, who must have had sore feet from all his traipsing around.

For his part, Maigret would have preferred to find the man who came and sat down on the bench after silently requesting Monsieur

Louis' permission when the latter was having a conversation with the book-keeper. That was why he was looking at the benches one after another. On one of them an old tramp had placed a half-full bottle of red wine. But it wasn't him. Monsieur Saimbron would have used the word 'tramp'.

'If I were you I'd concentrate less on the shops than on the people on the benches.'

He had spent enough time on the beat in his younger days to know that each bench has its regulars, who occupy it at the same time every day.

Passers-by never notice them. No one ever glances much at people sitting on benches. But the occupants of the benches know each other. Wasn't it by chatting with the mother of a small boy on a bench in Square d'Anvers while waiting for her dentist's appointment that Madame Maigret, without realizing it, had picked up the trail of a murderer?

'Do you want me to round them up?'

'Absolutely not! Just sit on the benches and get to know them.'

'OK, chief,' sighed Neveu, who was less than enthused by this prospect. He would rather have done more walking.

He had no idea that Maigret would have swapped places with him at the drop of a hat.

4. A Funeral in the Rain

The next day, a Wednesday, Maigret had to give evidence in court and lost most of the afternoon waiting in the dingy room set aside for witnesses. No one had thought to turn on the heating, so it was freezing in there. Then, when they did turn it on, within ten minutes it became too hot, with a strong odour of unwashed bodies and clothes that never got aired.

The defendant was a certain René Lecœur, who had beaten his aunt to death with a bottle seven months earlier. He was only twenty-two years old, built like a market porter but with the face of a naughty schoolboy. Why didn't they have better lighting in the rooms of the Palais de Justice? Any light here seemed to be swallowed up by the gloom.

Maigret felt depressed when he finally emerged from the room. A young lawyer who was starting to make a name for himself, not least because of his aggressive manner, was subjecting the witnesses to ferocious grillings, one after the other. When it was Maigret's turn he tried to establish that the accused had only confessed after being roughly treated at Quai des Orfèvres, which was simply not true. Not only was it untrue, but the lawyer knew it to be untrue.

'Can the witness tell us how many hours the first interrogation of my client lasted?'

Maigret had come prepared:

'Seventeen hours.'

'Without food?'

'Lecœur refused the sandwiches we offered him.'

The lawyer appeared to be saying to the jurors:

'You see, gentlemen? Seventeen hours with nothing to eat!'

Yet in that whole time Maigret himself had eaten only two sandwiches, and he hadn't killed anyone!

‘I put it to the witness that, on 7 March, at three o’clock in the morning, he struck the accused, without any provocation from the latter, who at the time had handcuffs on his wrists.’

‘No.’

‘The witness denies striking the accused?’

‘At one point I boxed his ears, as I might have done to my own son.’

The lawyer was in the wrong. This wasn’t proper procedure. But he was only interested in the reaction of the audience and how this would play in the newspapers.

Now, contrary to court rules, he addressed Maigret directly, his tone smooth but cutting at the same time.

‘Do you have a son, detective chief inspector?’

‘No.’

‘You don’t have any children, do you? . . . I’m sorry . . . I didn’t hear your reply.’

Maigret had to repeat out loud that he had had a daughter, but she did not survive.

That was it. When he left the witness box, he had a drink at the bar in the Palais de Justice and then returned to his office. Lucas, who had just concluded an inquiry that had been running for a fortnight, had joined in the Thouret case.

‘Any news on young Jorisse?’

‘Still nothing.’

Monique Thouret’s lover had not returned home the previous evening; nor had he turned up for work at the bookshop this morning or at midday at the cheap restaurant on Boulevard Sébastopol where he usually had lunch with the young woman.

Lucas was in charge of tracking him down and was in contact with all the railway stations, local police stations and border posts.

As for Janvier, along with four of his colleagues he was continuing to question all the hardware-shop owners in the hope of finding the one who had sold the knife.

‘Has Neveu rung in?’

Maigret really should have got back to the office sooner.

‘He telephoned half an hour ago. He will ring again around six.’

Maigret was feeling a little weary. He couldn’t get the image of René Lecœur sitting in the dock out of his head. Or the voice of the lawyer, the statuesque judges, the crowd in the dimly lit courtroom with its dark wood panelling. That was none of his business. Once a

man left the Police Judiciaire and was placed in the custody of the examining magistrate, the inspector's role was at an end. Sometimes things didn't turn out quite the way he would have liked. He knew only too well what would happen. If it had been up to him . . .

'Has Lapointe discovered anything?'

Everyone had ended up with a specific task. Young Lapointe had the job of visiting rented rooms in an ever-increasing circle starting from Boulevard Saint-Martin. Monsieur Louis must have changed his shoes somewhere. Either he was renting a room under his own name or he was using someone else's lodging, perhaps the woman with the fox-fur stole who had seemed like a legitimate wife and for whom he had bought a ring.

Santoni, for his part, continued to follow Monique, in the hope that Albert Jorisse would attempt to make contact with her or send her a message.

The family had had the corpse picked up the previous evening by an undertaker. The funeral was set for the following day.

More papers to sign, forms to fill in, boring telephone calls to make. He found it strange that not a single person had rung, written or turned up in person with information about Monsieur Louis. It was as if his death had left no trace.

'Hello!' said Maigret, picking up the receiver.

Inspector Neveu was on the line. He was in a bar, because there was music in the background, probably a radio.

'Still nothing definite, chief. I've found another three people, one of them an old woman, who spend part of their time on the benches on the boulevards and who remember him. Everyone says the same thing: he was very nice, polite to everyone, always willing to chat. According to the old lady, he would head off afterwards in the direction of Place de la République, but she would quickly lose sight of him in the crowd.'

'She never saw him with anyone else?'

'Not her. A tramp told me:

'"He was waiting for someone. When the man arrived, he went off with him."

'But he couldn't give me a description of the man. He just repeated:

'"Just ordinary-looking, like thousands of others."'

'Carry on,' Maigret sighed.

Then he telephoned his wife to say that he would be home a bit

late, went downstairs to get the car and gave the driver the address in Juvisy. A strong wind was blowing. The sky was low with scudding clouds like at the seaside when a storm is brewing. The driver had difficulty finding Rue des Peupliers. This time there was a light on upstairs as well as in the kitchen.

The bell didn't work. They had disconnected it as a mark of respect. But someone had heard him coming, and the door opened. He saw a woman whom he didn't recognize, who resembled Madame Thouret but was four or five years older.

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret . . .' he said.

She turned towards the kitchen and called out:

'Émilie!'

'I heard. Show him in.'

They received him in the kitchen, because the dining room had been transformed into a chapel of rest. There was a strong smell of flowers and candles permeating the narrow hallway. A group of people were sitting down to a cold supper.

'Excuse me for disturbing you . . .'

'Allow me to introduce Monsieur Magnin, my brother-in-law, who is a train inspector.'

'Pleased to meet you.'

Magnin was rather solemn, but stupid with it. He had a red moustache and a prominent Adam's apple.

'You know my sister Jeanne already. This is Céline . . .'

There was barely enough space in the tiny room for them all to squeeze in. Only Monique didn't stand up but merely looked at the inspector with a fixed stare. She must have been thinking that it was her that he had come to see, to question her about Albert Jorisse, and she was rigid with fear.

'My brother-in-law Landin, Céline's husband, will be coming back tonight on the Blue Train. He will just get here in time for the funeral. Would you like to sit down?'

He shook his head.

'Perhaps you would like to see him?'

She was very keen to show him that everything had been done properly. He followed her into the adjoining room, where Louis Thouret was laid out in an open coffin. She whispered:

'It's as if he were sleeping.'

He did what he was expected to do: dipped a box sprig in the holy water, made the sign of the cross, mouthed a few words, then

crossed himself again.

'He never imagined dying . . .'

She added:

'He loved life so much.'

They left on tiptoes, and she closed the door behind them. The others were waiting for Maigret to leave so that they could return to their meal.

'Are you coming to the funeral, inspector?'

'I'll be there. In fact, that's the reason for my visit.'

Monique still didn't stir, but she seemed somewhat relieved to hear him say this. Maigret appeared not to be paying her any attention, so she kept very still, as if this were enough to save her from whatever fate had in store for her.

'I assume you and your sisters will know most of the people who will be at the funeral, which I won't.'

'I get it!' said Magnin, as if he and Maigret were thinking along the same lines. Turning towards the others, he seemed to be saying: 'You'll see!'

'What I would like, quite simply, is for you to let me know if there is someone whose presence you find strange.'

'Do you think the killer will be there?'

'Not necessarily the killer. I'm trying to cover all possibilities. Remember that a part of your husband's life over the last three years remains unknown to us.'

'Are you implying there was a woman?'

Not only did her face harden, but those of her two sisters automatically took on the same expression.

'I'm not implying anything. I'm searching for something. So tomorrow, if you signal to me, I will know what you mean.'

'Anyone whom we don't know?'

He nodded, then apologized again for having disturbed them. It was Magnin who saw him out.

'Do you have any leads?' he asked, man to man, as if he were talking to a doctor who had just left his patient.

'No.'

'Not even an inkling?'

'Not even that. Good evening.'

This visit had done nothing to lift the weight that had fallen on his shoulders as he waited to testify at the Lecœur trial. On the car ride back to Paris his mind drifted to matters of no consequence.

When he had first arrived in the capital at the age of twenty, what had troubled him the most was the constant ferment of the city, the hundreds of thousands of people milling round in search of something or other.

At certain key points this ferment was more perceptible than at others: for example, Les Halles, Place Clichy, the Bastille and Boulevard Saint-Martin, where Monsieur Louis had met his death.

In former days what had struck, you might say even romantically inspired, him about this crowd in perpetual movement were those people who, discouraged, defeated and resigned, had given up on life and been swept along by the flow.

Since then he had come to know them, and they were no longer the ones who made the biggest impression on him; rather, those who did were on the rung above, the decent, honest, inconspicuous types who struggled day in, day out to stay afloat, or to foster the illusion, the belief, that they really existed and that life was worth living.

Every morning for twenty-five years Monsieur Louis had taken the same train with the same travelling companions, his lunch under his arm in an oilcloth, and in the evening he had returned to what Maigret was tempted to call the house of the three sisters, since even if Céline and Jeanne lived on other streets, they were somehow omnipresent, blocking the horizon like a stone wall.

'Back to the office, chief?'

'No. Back home.'

That evening, he took Madame Maigret to the cinema on Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle, as usual. Arm in arm with his wife, he passed by the alleyway off the Boulevard Saint-Martin both on the way there and on the way back.

'Are you in a bad mood?'

'No.'

'You haven't said a thing all evening.'

'I hadn't realized.'

It started to rain around three or four in the morning, and he could hear the water flowing down the gutters in his sleep. When he was having breakfast it was bucketing down in great squalls, and on the pavement people were clinging to their umbrellas, which constantly threatened to turn inside out.

'All Saints weather,' Madame Maigret remarked.

He himself always thought of All Saints as grey, windy and cold

but not rainy; he couldn't put a finger on why.

'Do you have a lot of work on?'

'I don't know yet.'

'You would be better off wearing your galoshes.'

He put them on. By the time he had hailed a taxi, his shoulders were soaked, and cold water continued to drip from his hat as he sat in the car.

'Quai des Orfèvres.'

The funeral was at two o'clock. He dropped by the commissioner's office but didn't stay to the end of the briefing. He waited for Neveu, who was meant to come and pick him up. He was taking him on the off chance, since now Neveu knew lots of people from the Saint-Martin neighbourhood by sight, and Maigret wanted to follow this line of inquiry.

'Still no news of Jorisse?' he asked Lucas.

For no obvious reason, Maigret was convinced that the young man had not left Paris.

'You should draw up a list of his friends and acquaintances of the last few years.'

'I've started doing that.'

'Keep going!'

Neveu appeared in the doorway, soaked to the skin too, and they went off together.

'Nice day for a funeral!' grumbled Neveu. 'I hope they've laid on cars.'

'I very much doubt it.'

At 9.50, they were standing outside the house of mourning. Black curtains embroidered in silver hung in front of the door. People were standing holding umbrellas on the unpaved roadside, where the rain was washing away the yellowish clay and forming rivulets. A few went inside to pay their respects and came out with sombre and self-important expressions, conscious of the duty they had just performed. There must have been around fifty people there, but there were some a bit further away, sheltering in the doorways of their houses. There would be other neighbours too, watching from indoors, who would only emerge at the last minute.

'Aren't you going in, chief?'

'I came yesterday.'

'It's not exactly a barrel of laughs in there.'

Neveu wasn't just talking about the atmosphere today, but about

the household in general. Yet thousands of people dreamed of owning a house like this.

'Why did they decide to live out here?'

'Because of her sisters and their husbands.'

There were a number of men present in railway uniforms. The marshalling yard was just up the road. Most of the lots were occupied by people with a close or distant connection with the railways.

The hearse arrived first. Then, striding along quickly under his umbrella, a priest in a surplice, preceded by an altar boy carrying a cross.

There was nothing in this street to break the wind, which stuck damp clothes to people's bodies. The coffin was soon streaming wet. As the family stood waiting in the hallway, Madame Thouret and her sisters whispered to each other. Maybe they didn't have enough umbrellas? Everyone was dressed in full mourning, including the brothers-in-law and, behind them, the girls, Monique and her three cousins.

That made seven women altogether, and Maigret would swear that the young ones resembled each other as much as their mothers did. It was a family of women, and you got the impression that the men were aware of being in the minority.

The horses snorted. The family took up position behind the hearse, followed by others who must have been friends or neighbours exercising their right to be near the head of the procession.

The rest followed in ragged single file, because of the squalls of rain, and some walked along the pavement, sticking close to the fronts of the houses.

'Do you recognize anyone?'

No one of the sort they were looking for. In particular, no woman who could have fitted the bill of the woman with the ring. There was a woman with a fox-fur stole, but Maigret had seen her emerge from one of the houses and lock the door behind her. As for the men, he couldn't picture any of them sitting on a bench on Boulevard Saint-Martin.

Nevertheless, Maigret and Neveu stayed until the end. Luckily there was no mass, just an absolution, so no one bothered to close the doors of the church, which meant that the stone floor very quickly became wet.

Twice Maigret caught the eye of Monique, and both times he could sense the fear gripping the young woman's chest.

'Are we going on to the cemetery?'

'It's not far. You never know.'

They had to wade ankle-deep through mud, because the grave was in a new part of the cemetery and the paths had barely been laid out. Every time she spotted Maigret, Madame Thouret assiduously had a good look round to show that she hadn't forgotten his request. When he went with all the others to offer his condolences, she muttered:

'I haven't noticed anyone.'

She had a red nose because of the cold, and the rain had washed away her face powder. The four cousins too had shiny faces.

They waited outside the gate for a while, then went into the seedy café opposite, where Maigret ordered two hot toddies. They weren't the only ones there. A few minutes later half the funeral had crammed in and were stamping their feet on the tiled floor to warm them up.

From the hubbub of conversation Maigret picked up only the following words:

'She doesn't have a pension.'

The sisters certainly would, as their husbands worked for the railways. Monsieur Louis had always been the poor relation. Not only did he work in a warehouse, but he had no pension.

'What will they do?'

'The girl is working. They'll probably take in a lodger.'

'Are you coming, Neveu?'

It poured all the way back to Paris, where the rain was lashing the pavements. The cars threw up thick whiskers of muddy water.

'Where shall I drop you?'

'There's no point getting changed as I'll still have to wear this wet coat. Drop me at the Police Judiciaire and I'll take a taxi to the Préfecture.'

The corridors of Quai des Orfèvres were covered in footprints like the floor of the church. There was the same cold, damp atmosphere. A man with handcuffs on his wrists sat on a bench outside the office of the head of the Gambling Squad.

'Anything new, Lucas?'

'Lapointe phoned in. He's at the Brasserie de la République. He's found the room.'

‘Louis’ room?’

‘That’s what he says, though the landlady has been reluctant to help him in his inquiries.’

‘Did he want me to ring him?’

‘Unless you prefer to go there in person.’

Maigret chose to do that. He couldn’t stand sitting in his office when he was soaked through.

‘Anything else?’

‘A false alarm on the young man. We thought we’d found him in the waiting room of Gare de Montparnasse. It wasn’t him, just someone who looked like him.’

Maigret got back in the black car and, a few minutes later, was walking into the bar on Place de la République, where Lapointe was sitting next to the stove, nursing a cup of coffee. He ordered a toddy.

He felt as if some of the chilling rain falling from the sky had got up his nostrils and was sure a head cold would be on the way. Maybe it was because of the tradition that you always catch colds at funerals?

‘Where is it?’

‘Just a stone’s throw from here. I found it by sheer luck, because it’s not a hotel and it doesn’t appear on our lists.’

‘Are you sure it’s the right place?’

‘You’ll meet the landlady yourself. I was walking down Rue d’Angoulême on the way from one boulevard to another when I spotted a sign which said: “Room to rent”. It is a small building, no concierge, just two storeys. I rang the bell and asked to see the room. I took an instant dislike to the landlady. She’s middle-aged, probably was a beautiful redhead in her day, but now her hair is thinning and faded, and she looks flabby under her sky-blue dressing gown.

‘“Is it for you?” she asked without opening the door more than a crack. “Are you on your own?”

‘I heard a door open on the first floor and saw a face briefly peer over the banister, a pretty girl, also wearing a dressing gown.’

‘A brothel?’

‘I don’t think so, not exactly. But I wouldn’t bet against the landlady being a former madam.

‘“Do you want to rent by the month? Where do you work?”

‘Finally she took me up to the second floor. The room looked out

on the courtyard and wasn't badly furnished. A bit too plush for my taste, lots of poor-quality velvet and silk and a doll on the bed. It still had a female smell.

'"Who gave you this address?"

'I almost said that I had just seen the sign. All the time that we were talking, I was bothered by the sight of her sagging breast, which looked like it was going to pop out of her dressing gown at any moment.

'"A friend," I replied.

'Then, just on the off chance, I added:

'"He told me that he lived here."

'"Who is he?"

'"Monsieur Louis."

'Then I found out that she knew him. Her expression changed. Her voice too.

'"Don't know him!" she said sharply. "Do you usually come home late?"

'She was trying to get rid of me.

'"In fact," I went on, still playing the innocent, "maybe my friend is here now. He doesn't work during the day and he gets up late."

'"Do you want the room or not?"

'"I'll take it, but—"

'"You pay rent in advance."

'I took my wallet from my pocket. As if by accident I found a photo of Monsieur Louis in it.

'"Look! I have a picture of my friend here."

'She barely glanced at it.

'"I don't think we're going to get on, you and I," she said, heading for the door.

'"But—"

'"If you don't mind seeing yourself out, my dinner will be burned soon if I don't attend to it."

'I was sure that she knew him. When I left I saw a curtain twitching. She seemed to be on the alert.'

'Let's go,' said Maigret.

Even though it was just a short distance away, they took the car, which pulled up in front of the house. The curtain twitched again. The woman who came to the door wasn't dressed but was still wearing the same dressing gown: she couldn't have chosen a colour as unbecoming to her as that blue if she had tried.

‘What is it?’

‘Police Judiciaire.’

‘What do you want? I thought that that idiot had trouble written all over him,’ she grumbled, casting a sour look at Lapointe.

‘I think it would be better to discuss this inside.’

‘Oh, I’m not going to stop you coming in. I’ve got nothing to hide.’

‘Why did you not admit that Monsieur Louis was your tenant?’

‘Because that was no business of his.’

And she showed them into a small, overheated living room, full of garishly coloured cushions embroidered with cats, hearts, musical notes. As the curtains let in hardly any daylight, she turned on a standard lamp with a huge orange shade.

‘What exactly do you want from me?’

Maigret took the photo of the recently interred Monsieur Louis from his pocket.

‘This is him, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. You’d have found out in the end anyway.’

‘How long has he been renting from you?’

‘About two years. Maybe a little more.’

‘Do you have many?’

‘What, tenants? This house is too big for a woman on her own. And people don’t find it easy to find places to rent these days.’

‘How many?’

‘Three at present.’

‘And one spare room?’

‘Yes. The one I showed that boy. I should have known he wasn’t to be trusted.’

‘What do you know about Monsieur Louis?’

‘He was a quiet man, never caused any trouble. Since he worked nights—’

‘Do you know where he worked?’

‘I wasn’t nosy enough to ask him. He left in the evening and came home in the morning. He didn’t seem to need much sleep. I often told him that he should try to get more sleep, but it seems that most people who work nights are like that.’

‘Did he have many visitors?’

‘What are you driving at, exactly?’

‘You read the papers . . .’

There was a morning newspaper lying open on a table.

‘I see what you’re saying. But first I need to make sure you’re not going to cause me any problems. I know the police.’

Maigret was sure that, if he searched through the archives of the Vice Squad, he would find a file on this woman.

‘I don’t shout it from the rooftops that I take in boarders and I don’t like to draw attention to them. It’s not a crime. All the same, if this is going to get me into trouble . . .’

‘That depends on you.’

‘Is that a promise? First of all, what rank are you?’

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.’

‘Good! Fine! It’s more serious than I thought. It’s your colleagues in Vice who get on my . . .’

And she came out with an expression so coarse that it almost made Lapointe blush.

‘OK, I know that he was killed. But I don’t know anything more.’

‘What name did he give you?’

‘Monsieur Louis. That’s all.’

‘Was he visited by a woman – dark-haired, middle-aged?’

‘An attractive woman, not a day over forty, who took good care of herself.’

‘Did she come here often?’

‘Three or four times a week.’

‘Do you know her name?’

‘I called her Madame Antoinette.’

‘You seem to have a habit of calling people by their first names.’

‘I’m not nosy.’

‘Did she stay very long upstairs?’

‘As long as it took.’

‘The whole afternoon?’

‘Sometimes. Other times, just an hour or two.’

‘Did she ever come in the morning?’

‘No. Maybe once or twice, but not often.’

‘Do you know her address?’

‘I didn’t ask for it.’

‘Are your other tenants all women?’

‘Yes. Monsieur Louis is the only man who—’

‘Did he ever have relations with any of them?’

‘Do you mean sexual relations? If so, then no. It didn’t seem to interest him. If he had wanted to—’

‘Did he frequent them?’

‘He spoke to them. They’d knock on his door sometimes to ask him for a light or a cigarette or the newspaper.’

‘Is that all?’

‘They chatted. He’d sometimes play cards with Lucile.’

‘Is she upstairs?’

‘She’s been away for two days. It happens all the time. She must have found someone. Don’t forget you promised I wouldn’t get into any trouble. Or my tenants.’

He didn’t point out that he had promised no such thing.

‘Did anyone else come to see him?’

‘Someone came asking after him two or three times, not very long ago.’

‘A young woman?’

‘Yes. She didn’t go up. She asked me to let him know that she was waiting.’

‘Did she give you her name?’

‘Monique. She stayed in the hallway, wouldn’t even come into the living room.’

‘Did he come down?’

‘The first time he spoke to her in a whisper for a few minutes, then she left. The other times he went out with her.’

‘Did he tell you who she was?’

‘He only asked if I thought she was pretty.’

‘What did you reply?’

‘That she was nice in the way girls her age are these days, but in a few years she’d look like a horse.’

‘What other visitors did he have?’

‘Don’t you want to sit down?’

‘No thank you. No point in making your cushions wet.’

‘I keep the house as clean as I can. Wait a minute, someone else came – a young man, didn’t give me his name. When I told Monsieur Louis that he was waiting downstairs he seemed a bit agitated. He asked me to show him up. The young man stayed about ten minutes.’

‘How long ago was that?’

‘It was in the middle of August. I remember how hot it was, and all the flies.’

‘Did he ever come back?’

‘They came in together once, as if they had just bumped into each other in the street. They went upstairs again. The young man left

straight away.'

'Is that all?'

'It seems like quite a lot to me. Now I suppose you'll be asking me to let you go upstairs.'

'Yes.'

'Second floor, the room opposite the one that I showed to your underling, the one that looks out on to the street. We call it the green room.'

She sighed and carried on sighing as she hauled herself up to the second floor.

'Don't forget what you promised . . .'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'By the way, if you try to do the dirty on me, I'll tell the court that everything you said was a pack of lies.'

'Do you have the key?'

Through an open door on the floor below he had seen a young woman watching them, completely naked, with a bath towel in her hand.

'I have a master key.'

And she called down the stairwell:

'It's OK, Yvette, it's not Vice.'

5. The Policeman's Widow

The furniture in the room must have been bought in a local auction house. Made of 'solid' walnut, it was about fifty or sixty years out of date and included a huge mirror-fronted wardrobe.

What struck Maigret the most as he walked in was a birdcage on a round table covered with an Indian-print cloth in which a canary immediately started to hop around. The place reminded him of Monsieur Saimbron's rooms on Quai de la Mégisserie, and he would have bet good money that Louis Thouret had bought the bird to give to the old book-keeper on one of his visits.

'I suppose this is his?'

'He got it maybe a year or so ago. He was swindled, because the bird doesn't sing. It's a female, but they passed it off as a male.'

'Who did the housework for him?'

'I let out furnished rooms and provide linen, but I don't offer cleaning. I did try it once, but I had too many problems with the maids. And as my tenants are mainly women . . .'

'Did Monsieur Louis clean his own room?'

'He made the bed, cleaned the bathroom, dusted. As a special arrangement with him I would come up once a week and give the place a good once-over.'

She remained standing in the doorway, which bothered Maigret somewhat. For him, this was no ordinary room. It was the place that Monsieur Louis had chosen as his refuge. In other words, the items in the room were not the little necessities of everyday life, as you would normally find, but spoke of his personal, almost secret, tastes.

In the mirror-fronted wardrobe there wasn't a single suit, but there were three pairs of yellow shoes lovingly stacked on shoe-trees. Also on the sideboard, there was a pearl-grey hat, which had

hardly been worn; he must have bought it on a whim one day, another act of rebellion against the oppressive atmosphere at Juvisy.

'Did he go to the races?'

'I don't think so. He never talked to me about it.'

'Did he often talk to you?'

'In passing. He would drop by the living room for a chat.'

'Was he a happy person?'

'He seemed quite content with life.'

By way of further rebellion against his wife's tastes he had acquired a floral-print dressing gown and some red kid-leather slippers.

The room was tidy, everything in its place, not a speck of dust on the furniture. In a cupboard Maigret found an opened bottle of port and two stemmed wine glasses. A raincoat hung on a hook.

He hadn't thought about that. When it rained in the middle of the day but not in the evening, Monsieur Louis couldn't go home to Juvisy in wet clothes.

He must have spent hours reading. There was a long row of books on the chest of drawers: cheap editions of swashbuckler novels and just two or three detective stories: he can't have been too enamoured of the latter, as he hadn't bought any more.

His armchair was beside the window. Next to it, on a side-table, there was a photograph in a mahogany frame showing a dark-haired woman in her forties, dressed in black. She matched the description given by the jewellery shop assistant. She seemed quite tall, had the same sturdy build as Madame Thouret and the same unyielding flesh. She was what some people might describe as a fine figure of a woman.

'Is she the one who came to see him more or less regularly?'

'Yes.'

He found other photos in a drawer, the sort you get from automatic photo booths. There were some of Monsieur Louis himself among them too, his face a little blurred, and in one he was wearing the pearl-grey hat.

Apart from two pairs of socks and a few ties, there were no other personal possessions in the room: no shirts or underwear, no papers either, or old letters or any of the various bits of junk with which drawers gradually become stuffed.

Maigret, remembering how, as a child, he had wanted to hide

things from his parents, pulled a chair over to the wardrobe and had a look on top of it. As in most houses, there was a thick layer of dust on top, but there was a distinct rectangular patch where an object such as an envelope or a book must have lain.

He didn't muse on this. The woman was still following him with her eyes, and, as Lapointe had said, one of her breasts – always the same one, soft and wobbly like bread dough – had a tendency to slip free of her dressing gown.

'Did he have a key to the room?'

They had only found a key to the house in Juvisy on him.

'Yes, he had one, but he left it with me when he went out.'

'Do the other tenants do that?'

'No. He told me that he misplaced everything, so he'd rather leave it downstairs and pick it up on the way in. As he wasn't coming home in the evening or at night . . .'

Maigret took the photo out of the frame. Before he left he changed the water in the birdcage and had another poke around in the room.

'I'll probably be back,' he told her.

She led the way downstairs.

'I suppose there's no point in offering you a glass of something?'

'Do you have a telephone? Give me your number. I may need to ring you to ask you about something.'

'Bastille 22-51.'

'Your name?'

'Mariette. Mariette Gibon.'

'Thank you.'

'Is that all?'

'For now.'

He and Lapointe made a dash for the car through the rain, which was still bucketing down.

'Drive as far as the corner of the street,' Maigret ordered.

And, to Lapointe:

'Go back to the house. I forgot my pipe in the room upstairs.'

In fact, Maigret hadn't 'forgotten' his pipe at all. Besides, he always carried a spare in his pocket.

'On purpose?'

'Yes. Keep Mariette occupied for a few minutes and then come and find me here.'

He pointed out a small bar, which sold firewood and coal. He

hurried inside and used the telephone to ring headquarters.

'Lucas, please . . . Is that you, Lucas? . . . I want you to arrange to have the following telephone number tapped straight away: Bastille 22-51.'

Then, while waiting for Lapointe to return, and having nothing to do but sip his drink at the bar, he took a closer look at the photo. It didn't surprise him in the least that Louis had chosen the same physical type as his wife for his mistress. He only wondered whether she had the same personality. Anything was possible.

'Here's your pipe, chief.'

'Was she on the phone when you got back there?'

'I don't know. There were two other women with her.'

'The naked woman?'

'She'd pulled on a dressing gown.'

'You can go and get some lunch. I'll see you back at headquarters this afternoon. I'll hold on to the car.'

He gave the driver Léone's address in Rue de Clignancourt. He stopped off on route at a confectioner's to buy a box of chocolates. He shielded it under his raincoat as he walked from the car. It seemed a bit incongruous to go into an establishment like that, full of light and delicate things, with his clothes soaked through, but he had no choice. He handed over the chocolates somewhat awkwardly and said:

'For your mother.'

'How kind of you to think of her.'

Perhaps because of the humidity, it was even warmer in there than on the previous occasion.

'Wouldn't you like to give them to her yourself?'

He preferred to stay out in the shop, where he could still feel in contact with the world outside.

'I only want to show you this photo.'

She glanced at it and said immediately:

'It's Madame Machère!'

Maigret was pleased. It wasn't the sort of result that lent itself to banner headlines. It was really hardly anything at all. But it did prove to him that he hadn't been mistaken about Monsieur Louis. He wasn't the sort of man who would have picked up a woman in the street or in a bar. Maigret didn't see him as the type who would chat up a complete stranger.

'How do you know her?' he asked.

‘Because she worked at Kaplan’s. Not for very long. Only six or seven months. Why are you showing me this photo?’

‘She was Monsieur Louis’ girlfriend.’

‘Ah!’

He knew that would upset her, but he couldn’t avoid it.

‘Did you ever notice anything between them when they were both in Rue de Bondy?’

‘I’d swear that there was nothing going on. They worked in the warehouse, with ten or fifteen others, depending on the time of year. Her husband was a policeman, I seem to recall.’

‘Why did she leave her job?’

‘I think she had to have an operation.’

‘Thank you. I’m sorry to have disturbed you again.’

‘You aren’t disturbing me. Have you seen Monsieur Saimbron?’

‘Yes.’

‘Tell me. Did Monsieur Louis live with that woman?’

‘She visited him in the room he was renting near to Place de la République.’

‘I’m sure she was just a friend and that there was nothing between them.’

‘It’s possible . . .’

‘If the company records still existed I could give you her address. But I don’t know what has become of them.’

‘Now I know she is a policeman’s wife, I will be able to find her. You said her name was Machère, didn’t you?’

‘Unless I’m misremembering. Her first name is Antoinette.’

‘Goodbye, Mademoiselle Léone.’

‘Goodbye, Monsieur Maigret.’

He made a getaway, because the old lady was stirring in the back room, and he couldn’t summon up the courage to go and see her.

‘The Préfecture.’

‘At Quai des Orfèvres?’

‘No. The Police Municipale.’

It was midday. People were spilling out of the offices and shops and waiting to cross the road and make a dash to their usual restaurant. There were groups sheltering in all the doorways, all with the same expression of glum resignation on their faces. On the news-stands the papers were all soaked.

‘Wait for me here.’

He found the office of the personnel director and asked about a

certain Machère. A few minutes later he learned that there had indeed been a police officer called Machère, but he had been killed in a brawl two years earlier. At the time he was living in Avenue Daumesnil. His wife was drawing a pension. The couple didn't have children.

Maigret noted down the address. To save time, he telephoned Lucas, which meant he didn't have to cross Boulevard du Palais.

'Has she made any calls?'

'Not yet.'

'Has anyone called her?'

'Not her. Only one of her girls, name of Olga, about a dress fitting. We checked, and the call came from a dressmaker in Place Saint-Georges.'

He would have lunch later. For now he was happy to grab an aperitif in a bar and then get back into the little black car.

'Avenue Daumesnil.'

It was a long way down the avenue, next to the Métro station. He found an ordinary, lower-middle-class building, somewhat shabby-looking.

'Madame Machère, please.'

'Fourth floor on the left.'

There was a lift, which rose by fits and starts, sometimes lurching to a halt between floors. The brass button on the door was well polished, and the doormat was clean. He rang. Straight away, he heard footsteps inside.

'One moment!' came a voice from the other side of the door.

She must have been pulling on a dress over her négligé. She wasn't the sort of woman to display herself in a dressing gown, not even to the gasman.

She gazed at Maigret without a word, but he could tell that she was upset.

'Come in, detective chief inspector.'

She looked just like her photos, just as the jewellery shop assistant had described her, tall and sturdy, with a calm demeanour, very self-confident. She had recognized Maigret. And of course she knew why he was here.

'This way . . . I was just doing some housework.'

Be that as it may, her hair was neatly brushed, and she was wearing a dark dress with not a button undone. The parquet floor was gleaming. Next to the door there were two felt pads which she

must have put under her shoes when she came home with wet feet.

'I'll make everything dirty.'

'It doesn't matter.'

It was basically the same as the interior of the house in Juvisy, only less new and more highly polished, with the same knick-knacks on the furniture and, on top of the dresser, a photograph of a police constable with a medal hung over the frame.

He didn't want to embarrass her or take her by surprise. But then, she shouldn't have been surprised anyway. He simply said:

'I've come to talk to you about Louis.'

'I was expecting you.'

Even though she was sad, she kept a dry eye and a dignified expression.

'Please take a seat.'

'I will make your chair damp. Were you close friends, you and Louis?'

'He liked me well enough.'

'No more than liked?'

'Maybe. He had never been very happy.'

'Were you already in a relationship with him when you were working in Rue de Bondy?'

'You're forgetting that my husband was still alive then.'

'Did Louis ever make approaches to you?'

'He never considered me any differently from the other women in the warehouse.'

'So it was later, after Kaplan's had gone out of business, that you met up again?'

'Eight or nine months after my husband's death.'

'Did you meet by chance?'

'You know as well as I do that a widow's pension is not enough to live on. I had to look for a job. Even when my husband was alive I had jobs, for example at Kaplan's, but I didn't work regularly. A neighbour introduced me to the staff manager at the Châtelet, and I got a job as an usherette.'

'Is that where . . .?'

'Yes, one day when we had a matinee screening. We were screening *Around the World in Eighty Days*, as I recall. I recognized Monsieur Louis as I was showing him to his seat. He recognized me too. Nothing else happened. But he came back, always to a matinee, and looked around for me when he walked in. That went on for

some time, because there are only two matinees a week apart from Sunday. One day, on the way out, he asked me out for a drink. We had a quick dinner, because I had to be back for the evening screening.'

'Did he already have his room in Rue d'Angoulême?'

'As far as I know.'

'Did he tell you that he wasn't working any more?'

'He didn't say that, just that he was free every afternoon.'

'You didn't know what he did?'

'No. I would never have dreamed of asking.'

'Did he speak to you much about his wife and his daughter?'

'A lot.'

'What did he tell you?'

'You know, things I can't really repeat. When a man is unhappy at home and takes you into his confidence . . .'

'He was unhappy at home?'

'They treated him like dirt, because of his brothers-in-law.'

'I don't understand.'

In fact, Maigret understood only too well, but he wanted to encourage her to talk.

'They both have good jobs. They get free travel for themselves and their families . . .'

'And a pension.'

'Yes. They criticized Louis for lacking ambition, for being satisfied to spend his whole life working as a lowly warehouseman.'

'Where did you go with him?'

'Almost always to the same café, in Rue Saint-Antoine. We would talk for hours.'

'Do you like waffles?'

She blushed.

'How do you know about that?'

'He went to buy waffles in Rue de la Lune.'

'Much later, when . . .'

'When you started visiting him in Rue d'Angoulême?'

'Yes. He wanted me to see the place where he spent a good part of his time. He called it his bolt-hole. He was very proud of it.'

'He didn't tell you why he had rented a room in town?'

'To have a little place he could call his own, even if it was only for a few hours a day.'

'Did you become his mistress?'

‘I went to his place quite often.’

‘Did he give you jewellery?’

‘Just some pendant earrings, six months ago, and a ring, more recently.’

She was wearing it on her finger.

‘He was too nice, too sensitive. He needed someone to raise his spirits. Whatever you might think, more than anything I was a friend to him, his only friend.’

‘Did he ever come here?’

‘Never! Because of the concierge and the neighbours. It would have been the talk of the neighbourhood.’

‘Did you see him on Monday?’

‘For about an hour.’

‘At what time?’

‘Early afternoon. I had shopping to do.’

‘Did you know where to find him?’

‘I arranged to meet him.’

‘By telephone?’

‘No. I never phoned him. We set it up the last time we got together.’

‘Where did you meet?’

‘Almost always in our little café. Sometimes on the corner of Rue Saint-Martin and the Boulevards.’

‘Was he punctual?’

‘Always. On Monday it was cold and foggy. I have a delicate throat. We went to a newsreel cinema.’

‘Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle.’

‘You know?’

‘What time did you leave?’

‘Around four. Half an hour before he died, if what the papers say is true.’

‘Do you know if he had arranged to meet anyone else?’

‘He didn’t say anything to me.’

‘Did he ever talk to you about his friends, the people he knew?’

She shook her head and looked at the glass-fronted dresser in the dining room.

‘Would you care for a glass of something? I only have vermouth. I’ve had it a while, because I don’t drink.’

He accepted out of politeness. There was a layer of sediment in the base of the bottle, which no doubt dated from the time of the

late police officer.

'When I read the newspaper I almost came to see you. My husband often spoke to me about you. I recognized you straight away when you arrived just now, because I have seen your photo so many times.'

'Did Louis ever talk about divorcing his wife to marry you?'

'He was too afraid of his wife.'

'And his daughter?'

'He loved his daughter very much. He would have done anything for her. Nevertheless, I think he was also a little disappointed in her.'

'Why?'

'It's just a feeling I had. He was often sad.'

She didn't seem that cheerful herself; she spoke in a dull, monotonous voice. Was it she who cleaned the apartment in Rue d'Angoulême when she paid him a visit?

He couldn't see her undressing before Louis and lying on the bed. He couldn't even imagine her naked, or in her underwear. He could much more easily picture them in their little café, as she described it, sitting in the shadows, speaking quietly, occasionally glancing at the clock above the bar.

'Did he spend a lot of money?'

'That depends on what you mean by "a lot". He didn't go without. He seemed well enough off. If I had let him, he would have bought me all sorts of presents, silly trinkets that he spotted in shop windows.'

'Have you ever bumped into him sitting on a bench?'

'On a bench?' she repeated, as if the question had struck her.

She hesitated.

'One morning I was out doing the shopping. He was in conversation with a thin man, who made a very strange impression on me.'

'In what way?'

'He reminded me of a clown or a comedian without his make-up on. I didn't stare at him. I simply noticed that his shoes looked worn and the hem of his trouser legs was frayed.'

'Did you ask Louis who he was?'

'He told me that you meet all sorts sitting on benches, and it can be quite fun.'

'Do you know anything else? Didn't you want to go to the

funeral?'

'I didn't dare. In a day or two I'm planning to take some flowers to his grave. I suppose the warden will show me where it is. Will I be mentioned in the newspapers?'

'I'm sure you won't.'

'It's really important. They're very strict about this sort of thing at the Châtelet, and I could lose my job.'

It wasn't too far to Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, so when he left her Maigret had the driver drop him off at his apartment, telling him:

'Go and get something to eat and meet me back here in one hour.'

During lunch, his wife looked at him more closely than usual. Finally, she spat it out:

'What's the matter with you?'

'Why should there be anything the matter with me?'

'I don't know. You seem like a different person.'

'Like who?'

'Nobody in particular. You're just not Maigret.'

He laughed. He was thinking about Louis so much he had ended up adopting what he imagined had been the latter's mannerisms, his very facial expressions.

'I trust you're going to change out of that suit?'

'What's the point? I'm only going to get wet again.'

'Do you have another funeral?'

He did finally put on the clothes she laid out for him, and it felt pleasant to be dry again, albeit temporarily.

At Quai des Orfèvres he didn't go straight to his office but instead dropped in on the Vice Squad.

'Do you know of one Mariette or Marie Gibon? I'd be grateful if you could look her up in your files.'

'Young?'

'Fifties.'

Straight away, the inspector went to some filing cabinets full of faded, dusty files. He didn't have to look very long. The Gibon girl was born in Saint-Malo and had been a registered prostitute for eleven years. She had been hauled into Saint-Lazare police station, while it still existed, three times. Two arrests for scamming clients.

'Was she sent down?'

'Released through lack of evidence.'

'And since then?'

'Wait. I'll need to look in another file.'

She cropped up again in later files, though these were still more than a decade old.

'Before the war she worked as a madam's assistant in a massage parlour in Rue des Martyrs. At that time she was living with a certain Philippe Natali, known as Philippi, who was imprisoned for ten years for murder. I remember the case. There were three or four of them and they killed a guy from a rival gang in a tobacconist's in Rue Fontaine. It was never established who fired the shot, so they were all collared for the murder.'

'Is he out now?'

'He died in Fontevrault.'

That wasn't leading anywhere.

'And now?'

'Dunno. Unless she's dead too . . .'

'She's not dead.'

'She must have turned over a new leaf. Maybe a grand lady back in her home town?'

'She runs a lodging house in Rue d'Angoulême. It's not registered with the Hotel Agency. She mainly has girls there, but I don't think they ply their trade on the premises.'

'I see.'

'I'd like the place put under surveillance and some information on the tenants.'

'No problem.'

'I'd rather it was someone from Vice. My officers might not recognize certain people.'

'Understood.'

Finally, Maigret got to sit – slump, rather – in the chair in his office. Immediately, Lucas walked in through the door.

'Anything new?'

'Not as far as phone calls are concerned. There have been no calls on that number. But a curious thing happened this morning. One Madame Thévenard, who lives with her nephew in Rue Gay-Lussac, left her home to go to a funeral.'

'Her too?'

'Not the same one. This one was local. While she was away, her apartment was empty. When she got back she opened the larder to put away the shopping she had done while she was out and she noticed that a sausage that had been there two hours earlier had disappeared.'

‘And she is sure that . . .’

‘Absolutely certain! Besides, when she had a look round the apartment . . .’

‘Wasn’t she afraid?’

‘She was holding an old service revolver that belonged to her husband. He had fought in the First War. She’s quite a woman, by all accounts; she’s small and dumpy and always laughing. Under her nephew’s bed she found a handkerchief that didn’t belong to him as well as some breadcrumbs.’

‘What does the nephew do?’

‘His first name is Hubert and he’s a student. As the Thévenards aren’t very well off, he works during the day as a bookshop assistant on Boulevard Saint-Michel. Do you see where I’m going with this?’

‘I do. Did the aunt alert the police?’

‘She went downstairs to the concierge’s lodge to ring the local station. The inspector there got straight away in touch with me. I sent Leroy to question Hubert at the bookshop. The young man started shaking all over, then he burst out sobbing.’

‘Is Albert Jorisse his friend?’

‘Yes. Jorisse begged him to hide him in his bedroom for a few days.’

‘What reason did he give?’

‘That he’d had a row with his parents and that his father was furious and quite capable of killing him.’

‘So he’s spent two days and nights under the bed?’

‘Only one day and one night. The first night he walked the streets. At least that’s what he told his friend. I’ve alerted all the stations. The boy must be wandering the streets again.’

‘Does he have any money?’

‘Hubert Thévenard didn’t know.’

‘Have you alerted the railway stations?’

‘It’s all covered, chief. I’d be surprised if we don’t bring him in between now and tomorrow morning.’

What were they doing in Juvisy? No doubt the widow, her sisters, their husbands and the daughters had all dined together, a good dinner, of course, as is the way after funerals. They would have discussed Madame Thouret’s future, and Monique’s.

Maigret could just see the men relaxing in their armchairs having been served brandy, lighting up their special cigars.

‘Have a drink too, Émilie. You need cheering up.’

What would they be saying about the dead man? No doubt someone would mention that there had been a good turnout at the funeral, despite the bad weather.

Maigret almost felt a desire to go there. In particular, he wanted to see Monique and have a serious talk with her. But not at her house. Nor did he want to issue her with an official summons.

Mechanically he rang the number of her employers.

‘Geber and Bachelier’s?’

‘Gaston Bachelier speaking.’

‘Can you tell me if Mademoiselle Thouret is due in the office tomorrow morning?’

‘Certainly. She had to be off today for family reasons, but there’s no reason why . . . Who is this?’

Maigret hung up.

‘Is Santoni here?’

‘I haven’t seen him since this morning.’

‘Write a note telling him to keep watch outside the entrance to Geber and Bachelier’s tomorrow morning. When Mademoiselle Thouret arrives, tell him to bring her to me, and treat her gently.’

‘Here?’

‘Yes, I’ll be in my office.’

‘Anything else?’

‘No, nothing! Now let me get some work done.’

He had enough of Louis Thouret and his family and his mistress for one day. If it wasn’t for his sense of professional duty, he would have called it a day and gone to the cinema instead.

Until seven that evening he threw himself into his paperwork as if the fate of the world depended on it, not only working his way through his ‘pending’ file but also clearing up matters that had been awaiting his attention for weeks, months in some cases, and which were of no importance whatsoever.

When he finally left, his eyes blurry from having stared at printed papers for so long, he felt that something was different. It took a while to dawn on him that it had stopped raining. It felt like a void.

6. The Beggars

‘What’s she doing?’

‘Nothing. She’s sitting bolt upright, chin up, staring straight ahead of her.’

She hadn’t even chosen an armchair to sit on, but one of the hard wooden chairs in the waiting room. Maigret was deliberately letting her stew, as he liked to put it. When Santoni had come at around 9.20 to announce that Monique was there, he had growled:

‘Put her in the cage.’

That was his name for the glass-walled waiting room with its green velour armchairs, where many others before Monique Thouret had lost their nerve.

‘How is she?’

‘In mourning.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘It was almost as if she was expecting to see me there. I was standing two or three metres from the entrance to the building on Rue de Rivoli. When she arrived, I stepped forwards.

‘“Excuse me, mademoiselle . . .”

‘She screwed up her eyes to look at me. She must be short-sighted. Then she said:

‘“Oh! It’s you.”

‘“The detective chief inspector would like to have a word with you . . .”

‘She made no protest. I hailed a taxi, and all the way here she didn’t say a single word.’

Not only had the rain stopped, but the sun had come out. The light even seemed denser than normal, because of the humidity in the air.

Maigret had seen her on his way to the morning briefing, from

afar, sitting in her corner. He found her in exactly the same place, half an hour later, on his way back to his office. Later still, he had sent Lucas to take a peek.

'Is she reading?'

'No. She isn't doing anything.'

From where she was sitting she had a view of the Police Judiciaire similar to the one you would get of a restaurant coming through the door. She could see the inspectors walking up and down the corridor with its multiple doors, carrying files in their hands, going into each other's offices, setting off on assignments or returning from them. Sometimes they paused to exchange a few words on a case in progress; occasionally one would bring in a prisoner in handcuffs or propel in front of him a woman in tears. Other people who had arrived after her had been shown into offices, yet she displayed no sign of impatience.

The telephone in Rue d'Angoulême remained silent. Did Mariette Gibon suspect something? Had the ruse with the pipe rung her alarm bells?

Neveu, who had now been relieved from surveillance duty at the house by a local officer, had nothing unusual to report.

As for Albert Jorisse, they were almost certain that, at six o'clock the previous evening, he was still in Paris. Officer Dambois, who, like everyone else, had received a description of him, had spotted him around that time at the corner of Place Clichy and Boulevard des Batignolles. The young man was coming out of a bar. Did the officer move too quickly to try to apprehend him? Whatever it was that spooked him, Jorisse had run off through the crowd, which was particularly dense. The officer had whistled to alert his colleagues.

But it was all to no avail; there was little chance of catching him. Nor was there any point in combing the neighbourhood afterwards. As for the owner of the bar, he stated that his customer hadn't made a telephone call but had devoured five hard-boiled eggs with rolls and had drunk three cups of coffee.

'He seemed to be famished.'

Coméliau, the examining magistrate, had rung Maigret.

'Still nothing?'

'I hope to be able to arrest the killer within forty-eight hours.'

'Is it as we thought? A violent mugging?'

He had said 'yes'.

There was also the matter of the knife. In the morning mail there

was a letter from the firm that manufactured them. Right at the start of the investigation, Janvier had gone in person to see one of the directors of the company, who had told him that there was no way of determining whether the knife had been bought in one particular hardware shop rather than another. With a great deal of pride, he had told him the enormous number of knives they produced.

Now, however, someone with the title of 'Deputy Managing Director' was informing the commissioner of the Police Judiciaire that, from the serial number on the knife's handle, they could confirm that the knife used in Boulevard Saint-Martin had been part of a delivery sent four months earlier to a wholesaler in Marseille.

So the five inspectors who had spent the last three days questioning the shopkeepers in Paris had all been wasting their time. Janvier was furious.

'What should I do, chief?'

'Alert Marseille. Then find Moers or someone else from forensics and go to Rue d'Angoulême. Get Moers to lift all the fingerprints he can find in the room. Make sure he doesn't forget the top of the mirrored wardrobe.'

All this time Monique continued to wait. Every now and again Maigret sent someone to take a look in the cage.

'What's she doing?'

'Nothing.'

Stronger types than her had reached the end of their tether after an hour in that glass-walled cell. At 10.45 he finally sighed:

'Show her in.'

He stood up to greet her and apologized.

'As I wished to have a long chat with you I had to take care of other urgent matters first.'

'I understand.'

'Would you care to take a seat?'

She did so, tidied her hair to each side of her face and placed her handbag on her lap. He sat down in his chair, placed a pipe in his mouth and, before scraping the match along the box, murmured:

'Do you mind?'

'My father smoked. My uncles smoke as well.'

She was less nervous, less anxious than the first time she had come to his office. It was so mild this morning that the inspector had left the window open, and they could hear muffled sounds from

the street.

'I would like to talk to you about your father, naturally.'

She nodded.

'And about you, and certain other persons.'

She didn't help him out; nor did she avert her gaze, as if she knew what he was going to ask.

'Are you very close to your mother, Mademoiselle Monique?'

He had planned to subject her to a full grilling by adopting a softly-softly approach, gradually drawing her to the point where she would have to blurt out the truth. But he was thrown off course by her very first reply.

Quite calmly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, she said:

'No.'

'Are you saying you don't get along with her?'

'I hate her.'

'May I ask why?'

She merely gave a little shrug.

'You've been to our house. You've seen what she's like.'

'Could you be more precise?'

'My mother thinks of nobody but herself, her so-called social standing and providing for her old age. It annoys her that she didn't marry as well as her sisters, and she tries to convince herself that she is on the same level as them.'

She said this in a deeply serious tone, but Maigret could hardly resist smiling.

'Did you love your father?'

She remained silent. He had to repeat the question.

'I'm thinking about it. I ask myself that same question. It's embarrassing to admit that, now that he is dead.'

'So you weren't that fond of him?'

'He was a loser.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'He made no effort to change it.'

'Change what?'

'Everything.'

Then, with a sudden passion:

'This life we led – if you could call it a life. I gave up on it ages ago. Now I have only one thought in my head: to get out.'

'Get married?'

‘Get married or some other way. As long as I get out.’

‘Were you thinking of leaving imminently?’

‘One day soon.’

‘Did you discuss it with your parents?’

‘What would have been the point?’

‘You would have left without saying a word?’

‘Why not? What difference would it have made to them?’

He watched her with growing interest and sometimes forgot to inhale on his pipe. He had to relight it two or three times.

‘When did you learn that your father was no longer working in Rue de Bondy?’ he asked her point-blank.

He was expecting a reaction. He didn’t get one. She must have foreseen all these questions and prepared her answers. This was the only way to explain her composure.

‘Nearly three years ago. I can’t remember the precise date. It was around January. January or February. It was freezing.’

Kaplan’s had closed down at the end of October. In January and February, Monsieur Louis was still looking for a job. It was around this time that he had reached the end of his resources and reluctantly decided to borrow money from Mademoiselle Léone and the old book-keeper.

‘Did your father tell you about it?’

‘No. It was simpler than that. One afternoon, I was doing my rounds . . .’

‘You were working in Rue de Rivoli then?’

‘I joined the company at eighteen. As chance would have it, I had to visit a client, a ladies’ hairdresser, in the building where my father worked. I had a look in the courtyard. It was after four. It was completely dark. There were no lights on at the back. I was surprised and asked the concierge about it. She told me that Kaplan’s had gone out of business.’

‘Did you talk to your mother about it when you got home?’

‘No.’

‘Or your father?’

‘He wouldn’t have told me the truth.’

‘Was he in the habit of telling lies?’

‘It’s hard to explain. He always avoided making a scene at home and always told my mother exactly what she wanted to hear.’

‘He was afraid of her?’

‘He wanted a peaceful life.’

There was a hint of contempt in her voice as she said this.

'Did you follow him?'

'Yes. Not the next day, because I didn't have the opportunity, but two or three days later. I caught an earlier train, making out I had some urgent work to catch up on at the office, and I waited near the station.'

'What did he do that day?'

'He visited various offices, as if he was looking for a job. At midday he ate some croissants in a small bar, then he dashed off to a newspaper office to read the classified ads. I understood.'

'How did you react?'

'What do you mean?'

'You didn't ask yourself why he hadn't mentioned anything at home?'

'No. He wouldn't have dared. He would have created a scene. My uncles and aunts would have weighed in with their advice and criticized him for his lack of initiative. I've been hearing that word "initiative" ever since I was born.'

'Yet your father brought home a salary at the end of each month, didn't he?'

'That's what surprised me. I expected him to come home empty-handed. Instead, one fine day, he told my mother that he had "demanded" a pay-rise and had been given one.'

'When was this?'

'Quite a bit later. Around August.'

'Did you assume that your father had found another position?'

'Yes. I wanted to know, so I followed him again. But he still wasn't working. He was walking around, sitting on benches. Thinking that it was maybe his day off, I followed him again a week or two later, on a different day of the week. This time he spotted me, on the Grands Boulevards, where he had just sat down on a bench. He turned pale, wasn't sure what to do, but then came towards me.'

'Did he know that you had followed him?'

'I don't think so. He probably thought I'd just bumped into him by chance. He offered to buy me a coffee on the terrace of a café and opened up to me then. It was a hot day.'

'What did he tell you?'

'That Kaplan's had been bought out and he had found himself out of work; that he didn't want to say anything to Mama, so as not to

worry her, as he was sure that he would find a new job quickly.'

'Was he wearing yellow shoes?'

'Not that day. He went on to say that it had proved to be harder than he had expected, but now things were going well, he was working in insurance and his job left him with plenty of free time.'

'Why didn't he mention this at home?'

'Because of my mother again. She despises door-to-door salesmen, whether they are selling vacuum cleaners or insurance. She calls them good-for-nothings and beggars. If she had found out that her own husband was doing that job she would have felt so humiliated and she would have made his life hell. Especially with her sisters.'

'Your mother sets great store by her sisters' opinion, doesn't she?'

'She tries to keep up with them.'

'Did you believe what your father told you about the insurance job?'

'At the time, yes.'

'And later?'

'I was less sure.'

'Why?'

'First of all, because he was earning too much money.'

'As much as that?'

'I don't know what you mean by "as much as that". After a few months he announced that he had been made a deputy manager, still at Kaplan's, and had been given another pay-rise. I remember the conversation about this. Mama wanted him to change his profession on his identity card. She had always been humiliated by the word "warehouseman". He replied that it wasn't worth the effort for something so trifling.'

'I assume you and your father exchanged knowing glances at this?'

'When he was sure that my mother couldn't see me, he gave me a wink. Some mornings he slipped a banknote into my handbag.'

'To buy your silence?'

'Because he liked giving me money.'

'You told me that you occasionally met him for lunch.'

'That's right. He'd whisper the name of the restaurant to me in the hallway on the way out. In the restaurant he encouraged me to order the most expensive dishes and offered to take me to the cinema.'

'Did he wear his yellow shoes?'

‘Once. That’s when I asked him where he changed his shoes, and he told me that, for business purposes, he had to rent a room in town.’

‘Did he give you the address?’

‘Not straight away. This all happened over a long period of time.’

‘Did you have a boyfriend?’

‘No.’

‘When did you make the acquaintance of Albert Jorisse?’

She didn’t blush, didn’t stammer. She was expecting this question too.

‘Four or five months ago.’

‘Do you love him?’

‘We intend to go away together.’

‘To get married?’

‘Once he is old enough. He is only nineteen and can only get married with his parents’ permission.’

‘And they won’t give it?’

‘I’m sure they would never agree.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he has no position. That’s all they think about. Just like my mother.’

‘Where were you planning to go?’

‘South America. I’ve already applied for my passport.’

‘Do you have any money?’

‘A little. I’m allowed to keep a portion of what I earn.’

‘When was the first time you went to your father for money?’

She looked him straight in the eyes for a moment, then sighed:

‘You know that too!’

Then, without hesitation:

‘I thought as much. That’s why I’m telling you the truth. I don’t believe you would be mean enough to repeat all this to my mother. Unless you and she are one of a kind!’

‘I haven’t the slightest intention of telling your mother about your business.’

‘It wouldn’t change anything anyway.’

‘You mean you’d leave whatever happened?’

‘One day or another, yes.’

‘How did you know your father’s address in Paris?’

This time, she was on the point of lying.

‘Albert found it.’

‘By following him?’

‘Yes. We were both wondering what it was he did to earn his money. We decided that Albert would follow him.’

‘What business was it of yours?’

‘Albert thought my father might be up to something illegal.’

‘If that was the case, what were you hoping to gain from finding out?’

‘He was earning a lot of money.’

‘Were you thinking of asking him for some of it?’

‘At least enough to cover the boat tickets.’

‘By blackmailing him?’

‘It’s only natural for a father to . . .’

‘In short, your friend Albert started spying on your father.’

‘He followed him for three days.’

‘What did he find out?’

‘Have *you* found out anything?’

‘I asked you a question.’

‘First of all, that my father had a room in Rue d’Angoulême. Then, that he wasn’t working in insurance at all but spent the best part of the day traipsing round the Grands Boulevards and sitting on benches. Finally . . .’

‘Finally?’

‘That he had a mistress.’

‘How did you react to this discovery?’

‘I’d have been happier if she had been young and pretty, but she looked just like Mama.’

‘You’ve seen her?’

‘Albert told me about the place where they usually met.’

‘Rue Saint-Antoine?’

‘Yes. In a small café. I went past there as if by chance and had a look. I didn’t have time to take her in properly, but I got a general impression. It can’t be much more fun with her than with my mother.’

‘Did you go to Rue d’Angoulême afterwards?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did your father give you any money?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you threaten him?’

‘No. I pretended that I had lost the envelope containing the cash I had collected that afternoon and if I didn’t replace the money I

would be out of a job. I also said that they would prosecute me as a thief.'

'What was his reaction?'

'He seemed embarrassed. I noticed a photo of a woman on the side table and picked it up and said: "Who's this?"'

'What did he reply?'

'That she was a childhood friend whom he had bumped into by chance.'

'You're a nasty piece of work, aren't you?'

'I was just protecting myself.'

'Against whom?'

'Against everyone. I don't want to end up like my mother, in some ridiculous little house where I'll suffocate.'

'Did Albert go to see your father too?'

'I don't know.'

'You're lying, my dear.'

She gave him a serious look, then finally admitted:

'Yes.'

'Why lie about this in particular?'

'Because as soon as my father was killed, I knew Albert would be in trouble.'

'Do you know that he has disappeared?'

'He telephoned me.'

'When?'

'Before he disappeared, as you call it. Two days ago.'

'Did he tell you where he was going?'

'No. He was very agitated. He is convinced that he is going to be accused of murder.'

'Why?'

'Because he went to Rue d'Angoulême.'

'When did you find out that we were on your trail?'

'When your inspector interrogated that cow Mademoiselle Blanche. She hates me. She was boasting afterwards that she'd said enough to take me down a peg or two, as she put it. I tried to reassure Albert. I told him he was being an idiot trying to hide, because he was just drawing suspicion on himself.'

'But he wouldn't listen to reason?'

'No. He was so worked up he could hardly talk to me on the phone.'

'How can you be sure that he didn't kill your father?'

‘Why would he?’

Then, quite calmly, as one reasonable person to another, she said:

‘We could have asked him for all the money we needed.’

‘And if your father had refused?’

‘He wouldn’t have been able to. Albert simply had to threaten to tell my mother everything. I know what you’re thinking. You think I’m a nasty piece of work. You said so. But if you had spent the best years of your life stuck in that house in Juvisy—’

‘Did you see your father the day he died?’

‘No.’

‘What about Albert?’

‘I’m almost sure he didn’t. We hadn’t arranged anything for that day. We had lunch together, as usual, and we didn’t talk about anything in particular.’

‘Do you know where your father kept his money? As I understand it, your mother was in the habit of going through his pockets and his wallet every evening.’

‘She’s always done that.’

‘Why?’

‘Because once, more than ten years ago, she found lipstick on his handkerchief. My mother doesn’t use lipstick.’

‘You were quite young then.’

‘I was about ten or twelve. But I can still remember it. They weren’t paying any attention to me. My father swore that one of the women in the warehouse had passed out because of the heat and he had revived her by pouring some alcohol on his handkerchief and holding it to her lips.’

‘It was probably true.’

‘My mother didn’t believe it.’

‘To get back to my question: your father couldn’t come home with more money in his pocket than he was supposed to earn.’

‘He kept it in his room.’

‘On top of the wardrobe?’

‘How did you know?’

‘What about you?’

‘One time when I asked him for some money he climbed on to a chair and retrieved a yellow envelope from the top of the wardrobe which contained some thousand-franc notes.’

‘A lot?’

‘A fat wad.’

‘Did Albert know about it?’

‘It wasn’t a reason to kill him. I’m sure he didn’t do it. Besides, he would never have used a knife.’

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘I’ve seen him almost faint just when he cut his finger with a penknife. The sight of blood makes him ill.’

‘Do you sleep with him?’

Once again, she shrugged her shoulders.

‘What sort of question is that?’ she said.

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere. There are plenty of hotels in Paris set up for that. You’re not going to tell me that the police don’t know about them!’

‘So, to sum up this interesting conversation, you and Albert blackmailed your father with the intention of escaping to South America once you had accumulated enough funds?’

She didn’t flinch.

‘I also gather that, in spite of following him around, you weren’t able to establish how he got hold of his money.’

‘We didn’t look all that hard.’

‘All you cared about was that the money was there.’

Maigret occasionally got the feeling that she was looking at him with a certain condescension. She must have been thinking that, for a detective chief inspector of the Police Judiciaire, he was just as naive as her mother, her aunts and her uncles.

‘So now you know everything,’ she murmured, making to stand up. ‘You can see that I haven’t claimed to be anything different than what I am. As for what you think about me, I couldn’t care less.’

However, there was something bothering her.

‘You’re sure you won’t say anything to my mother?’

‘What does it matter, since you’re leaving anyway?’

‘Firstly, that’s going to take some time. Secondly, I really want to avoid a scene.’

‘I understand.’

‘Albert is still a minor, and his parents could—’

‘I would very much like to talk to Albert.’

‘If it were up to me, he’d be here this morning. He is a fool. I’m sure he’s hiding away somewhere, trembling with fear.’

‘You don’t seem to have a very high opinion of him.’

‘I don’t have a high opinion of anyone.’

‘Except yourself.’

‘Not even myself. I protect myself, that’s all.’

There was no point in pursuing this.

‘Have you told my employers that I’m here?’

‘I rang them to tell them I needed you to take care of certain formalities.’

‘When are they expecting me?’

‘I didn’t specify a time.’

‘May I go?’

‘I’m not keeping you.’

‘Will I be followed by one of your inspectors?’

He almost burst out laughing, but just managed to restrain himself.

‘Maybe.’

‘He’ll be wasting his time.’

‘Thank you for your help.’

Maigret did in fact have her followed, even though he was sure it would lead to nothing. Janvier was free, so he was given the task.

Maigret himself sat there for a good ten minutes, his elbows on his desk, biting on his pipe, staring vaguely at the window. Finally, he shook himself like a sleeper trying to recover his wits and stood up, grumbling under his breath:

‘Stupid idiot.’

Not knowing quite what to do, he went into the inspectors’ room.

‘Still no news on the boy?’

Albert must be feeling the need to contact Monique, but how could he do it without getting himself arrested? Maigret had forgotten to ask one question, a not unimportant one. Which of the pair of them was in possession of the stash that they were amassing to pay for their trip to South America? If it was him, then he would probably have some money in his pocket. If it was the other way round, then he probably didn’t even have enough to buy himself food.

He spent a few more minutes wandering deep in thought from one room to the other, then he rang the offices of Geber and Bachelier.

‘I would like to speak to Mademoiselle Monique Thouret.’

‘One moment, please. I think she’s just come in.’

‘Hello,’ came the voice of Monique.

‘Don’t get too excited. It’s not Albert, it’s Detective Chief Inspector Maigret again. I forgot to ask you a question. Is it he or

you who has the money?'

She understood what he meant.

'Me.'

'Where?'

'Here. I have a desk I can lock.'

'Does he have any money on him?'

'I'm sure he won't have very much.'

'Thank you. That's all.'

Lucas was signalling that he was needed on another phone. He recognized Lapointe's voice.

'Are you ringing from Rue d'Angoulême?' Maigret asked, surprised.

'Not from the house, but from the bar on the corner.'

'What's going on?'

'I'm not sure if it was done deliberately, but I thought I should let you know. They've cleaned the room from top to bottom. The floor and the furniture have been polished, and everything has been dusted.'

'Including the top of the wardrobe?'

'Yes. I got the feeling the woman was secretly laughing at me. I asked her when the room had been cleaned. She replied that she had her cleaning lady round yesterday afternoon on one of her twice-weekly visits, so she took advantage of that to give the room a thorough going-over.

'"You didn't leave any instructions, and as I need to rent out the room . . ."'

It was a blunder. Maigret should have seen it coming.

'Where is Moers?'

'Still up there. He's checking to see if any prints survived the carnage, but he's drawn a blank so far. If this was the work of a cleaning lady, then she's done a really good job. Shall I come back to Quai des Orfèvres?'

'Not straight away. Find out the name and address of the cleaner. Go and see her. Get her to tell you what happened, what instructions she was given, who was in the room while she was working . . .'

'Got it.'

'Moers can come back. One more thing. Is there anyone from Vice in the vicinity?'

'Yes. Dumoncel. I've just spoken to him, in fact.'

‘Get him to call in reinforcements. If any one of the tenants of the building leaves, I want her followed.’

‘None of them are about to leave. There’s one who seems to have this urge to walk around the stairwell naked, another who’s taking a bath. And the third one doesn’t seem to have been home for several days.’

Maigret headed for the commissioner’s office, as he did from time to time, without any particular purpose, purely to chat about the current investigation. He liked the atmosphere in the chief’s office and always stood next to the same window, which looked out on Pont Saint-Michel and the embankment.

‘Tired?’

‘I feel like I’m playing a game of patience. I want to be everywhere at the same time and I end up going round and round in circles in my office. This morning I conducted an interrogation that was one of the most—’

He paused, unable to find the right word. He felt exhausted, completely drained, in the sort of state of despondency that often accompanies a hangover.

‘Yet she was a young woman, no more than a kid, really.’

‘The Thouret girl?’

The telephone rang. The chief answered it.

‘Yes, he’s here.’

To Maigret:

‘It’s for you. Neveu has brought someone in and is keen to show you his catch.’

‘See you later.’

In the waiting room he spotted Inspector Neveu on his feet, very agitated, and, sitting down next to him, a pale, sickly-looking man of indeterminate age whom he thought he’d seen somewhere before. In fact, he looked as familiar as the back of his hand, but Maigret was still unable to put a name to the face.

‘Do you want to speak to me first?’ he asked Neveu.

‘No point. Not letting this one out of my sight for a second.’

Only now did Maigret notice that the man was handcuffed.

He opened the door to his office. The prisoner entered, dragging his feet a little. He smelled of drink. Neveu locked the door behind him and removed the handcuffs.

‘Don’t you recognize him, chief?’

Maigret still couldn’t remember his name, but something

suddenly dawned on him. The man looked like a clown without his make-up, with his rubbery cheeks and a wide-mouthed grin that was both sour and comical at the same time.

Who was it in this case who had mentioned a clown's face? Mademoiselle Léone? Monsieur Saimbron, the old book-keeper? One of them, at least, had seen Monsieur Louis on a bench on Boulevard Saint-Martin or Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle with a companion.

'Take a seat.'

The man replied like a regular visitor to Quai des Orfèvres:

'Thanks, chief.'

7. The Raincoat Shop

Jef Schrameck, known as Fred the Clown, also known as the Acrobat, born Riquewihr, Haut-Rhin, sixty-three years ago.

Flushed by his success, Neveu introduced his client like a ringmaster at a circus.

'Do you remember him now, chief?'

It had happened fifteen years previously, perhaps more. The event took place not far from Boulevard Saint-Martin, somewhere between Rue de Richelieu and Rue Drouot.

'Sixty-three?' Maigret repeated, looking at the man, who responded to the implied compliment with a broad grin.

He didn't seem that old, possibly because he was so thin. In fact, he was ageless. His facial expression in particular wasn't one of a man of advanced years. Even when he was afraid, as he no doubt was now, he seemed not to take people or himself seriously. His face-pulling had become a tic with him, based on a need to make people laugh.

The surprising thing was that he was already past forty-five years old when he had become famous for a few weeks following the events on the boulevards.

Maigret pressed the buzzer and lifted the receiver of the office intercom.

'Please bring me the file for Schrameck, Jef Schrameck, born Riquewihr, Haut-Rhin.'

He couldn't remember how it had all begun. It was at around eight o'clock one evening, and the Grands Boulevards were teeming with people; all the café terraces were packed. It was very early spring, as it was already dark.

Had someone spotted a dim light moving round in one of the office blocks? In any case, the alarm was raised, and the police

arrived on the scene. As usual, a group of curious onlookers began to gather, most of whom had no idea what was going on.

No one knew that the show was going to last more than two hours, with moments of high drama and comedy, and that in the end it would attract such a crowd that barriers had to be erected.

Cornered inside the building, the burglar had opened one of the windows and had started to shin his way along the front of the building by hanging on to a drainpipe. No sooner had he established a foothold on a window-sill on the floor above than a policeman appeared, and the man continued on his hazardous climb, accompanied by terrified shrieks from the women down below.

It was one of the most eventful chases in police history. Some officers ran upstairs inside the building, opening windows as they went up, while the man seemed to perform a circus act for his own amusement.

He got to the roof first, a steeply pitched roof, and the policemen didn't dare to follow him. He was impervious to vertigo. He jumped on to the neighbouring roof, and then from building to building, until he reached the corner of Rue Drouot, where he disappeared through a skylight.

He was lost from view until, a quarter of an hour later, he was spotted on another roof. People started pointing and shouting, 'There he is!'

No one knew whether he was armed, or what it was he had done. A rumour started going round that he had killed several people.

To cap off the whole exciting spectacle, the fire brigade turned up with their ladders, and, some time afterwards, spotlights were trained on the rooftops.

When he was finally arrested in Rue de la Grange-Batelière, he wasn't even out of breath. He was quite full of himself and mocked the police. And just as they were bundling him into a car, he slipped like an eel from the grasp of those who had arrested him and managed, God knows how, to make a getaway through the crowd.

It was Schrameck. For days the newspapers talked about nothing else but the man they called the Acrobat, until he was eventually recaptured, quite by chance, at a race-course.

He had started quite young in a circus that travelled round Alsace and Germany. Later, in Paris, he had worked in fairgrounds, apart

from a few spells in prison for burglary.

'I never imagined he'd end up seeing out his years on my patch,' said Neveu.

Schrameck replied earnestly:

'I cleaned up my act ages ago.'

'I'd been told about a tall, thin guy of a certain age who had been seen sitting on the benches with Monsieur Louis.'

Hadn't someone said to Maigret, 'The sort of man you see sitting on benches . . .'?

Fred the Clown was one of those people that no one is surprised to see hanging round doing nothing for hours on end, watching passers-by or feeding the pigeons. His complexion was as grey as the paving stones; his expression that of a person who had nothing to do nor anyone to see.

'Before you question him, I should tell you how I laid hands on him. I went into a bar on Rue Blondel, just a short hop from Porte Saint-Martin. It's called Chez Fernand and it doubles as a betting shop. Fernand is a former jockey, I know him well. I showed him the picture of Monsieur Louis, and he looked at it as if he recognized him.

'"Is he one of your customers?" I asked him.

'"Not him, no. But he has come in once or twice with one of my regulars."

'"Who?"

'"Fred the Clown."

'"The Acrobat? I thought he died years ago, or was in prison."

'"He's alive and well and he comes in here every afternoon to have a drink and a bet. Although, having said that, I haven't seen him for a few days."

'"How many days?"

'Fernand thought for a few moments, then went to check with his wife in the kitchen.

'"The last time he was in was Monday."

'"Was Monsieur Louis with him?"

'He couldn't remember, but he was sure that he hadn't seen the Acrobat since last Monday. Do you see what I'm saying?

'So I just had to find him. Now I knew where to look. In the end I discovered the name of the woman he had been living with for the last few years, a former street vendor called Françoise Bidou.

'Just earlier, I learned her address: Quai de Valmy, opposite the

canal.

'I found my man there, hiding in the bedroom, which he hadn't left since Monday. First thing I did was clap the cuffs on him, so he wouldn't wriggle out of my grasp.'

'I'm not as agile as I used to be!' Schrameck joked.

There was a knock at the door. A thick file with a yellow cover was placed in front of Maigret. It was Schrameck's life history, or rather the history of his brushes with the law.

In no particular hurry, puffing on his pipe, Maigret leafed through it.

It was the time of day that he liked best for interrogations of this sort. Between midday and two o'clock most of the offices are empty, there aren't so many comings and goings, and the telephone doesn't ring so much. Just as at night, you get the feeling of having the place to yourself.

'Are you hungry?' he asked Neveu.

As the latter didn't know how to reply, he added:

'You should go and get a bite to eat. You'll be taking over from me later on.'

'OK, chief.'

Neveu left, somewhat reluctantly, and the prisoner watched him go with a mocking look. Then Maigret lit another pipe, placed his large hand on the file, looked Fred the Clown in the eye and said:

'Just the two of us!'

He felt more at ease interrogating this man than he had Monique. Before he began, however, he took the precaution of locking his door, and he even bolted the door that led through into the inspectors' room. Seeing him glance at the window, Jef murmured with a comical grimace:

'Don't worry. I'm too old to climb along ledges any more.'

'I guess you probably know why you're here?'

He was choosing to play the fool.

'It's always the usual suspects,' he complained. 'It reminds me of the good old days. It's been a while since it happened to me.'

'Your friend Louis has been murdered. Don't look so surprised. You know very well what I'm talking about. You also know that there is every chance of you being accused of the crime.'

'That would be yet another miscarriage of justice.'

Maigret lifted the phone.

'Put me through to Chez Fernand on Rue Blondel.'

And when Fernand came to the phone:

'Detective Chief Inspector Maigret here. I'm ringing about one of your customers, Jef Schrameck . . . Yes, the Acrobat . . . I want to know if he placed any large bets . . . What's that? . . . Yes, I understand . . . And recently? . . . Saturday? . . . Thank you . . . No, that will be all for now.'

He seemed satisfied. Jef, on the other hand, looked a little worried.

'Would you like me to repeat what I've just been told?'

'People say all sorts of things.'

'All your life you've been throwing your money away at the races.'

'If the government had abolished them, I wouldn't have been able to.'

'For several years you have been placing your bets at Fernand's.'

'He's got a licence.'

'Nevertheless, you had to find the money you bet on the horses somewhere. Until about two and a half years ago you only bet small stakes; sometimes you didn't even have enough left to pay for your drinks, and Fernand let you put them on the slate.'

'He shouldn't have done that. It just encouraged me to come back.'

'You started placing bigger bets, sometimes some quite sizable sums. Then, a few days later, you'd be broke again.'

'What does that prove?'

'Last Saturday you bet a very large sum.'

'What would you say to the owners, then, when they stake as much as a million on a horse?'

'Where did the money come from?'

'I have a wife who works.'

'As what?'

'She is a cleaner. She occasionally helps out in one of the bars on the embankment.'

'Do you take me for a fool?'

'I wouldn't dream of it, Monsieur Maigret.'

'Listen, let's not waste any more time . . .'

'I'm in no great hurry . . .'

'I will explain your situation to you. Several witnesses have seen you in the company of one Monsieur Louis.'

'A fine gentleman.'

‘Never mind that. This isn’t a new acquaintance. It goes back about two and a half years. At that time Monsieur Louis had no job and he was living hand to mouth.’

‘I know the feeling!’ sighed Jef. ‘It’s a long, hard slog when you’re on your uppers.’

‘I don’t know what you were living on at the time, but I’m willing to believe that it was the money your Françoise earned. You hung around on benches. You bet a few francs on a horse and had a slate in the bars. As for Monsieur Louis, he had to resort to borrowing money from at least two people.’

‘I suppose that proves that there are some poor people on this earth.’

Maigret ignored this. Jef was so used to making people laugh that it had become almost a compulsion of his to play the fool. Patiently, Maigret continued to develop his point.

‘Yet it seems that you both became rich all of a sudden. The investigation will establish this, with the exact dates.’

‘I’m terrible with dates, me.’

‘Since then, you’ve had periods when you’ve gambled hard and other periods when you’ve bought your drinks on credit. The logical conclusion is that you and Monsieur Louis had a way of getting hold of money, lots of money, by some irregular means. We’ll deal with that in due course.’

‘That’s a shame. I’m dying to hear how we did it.’

‘You’ll have that smile wiped off your face soon enough. On Saturday, as I said, you were loaded, but you lost the lot in a few hours. On Monday afternoon your accomplice, Monsieur Louis, was murdered in an alleyway off Boulevard Saint-Martin.’

‘A tragic loss for me.’

‘Have you been up in front of a jury before?’

‘No, just the magistrates’ court. Quite a few times.’

‘Well, juries don’t like jokers, especially one with a record as long as yours. There is a very good chance that they would conclude that you were the only person who knew of all Monsieur Louis’ comings and goings and who had an interest in killing him.’

‘If that’s the case, then they are all idiots.’

‘That’s all I wanted to say to you. It is now twelve thirty. There are just the two of us here in my office. At one o’clock, Examining Magistrate Coméliau will arrive in his chambers, and I will send you to him to explain yourself.’

‘Is he the short dark-haired guy with the toothbrush moustache?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve met him before. He’s a bastard. Tell me, he must be getting on a bit now?’

‘You can ask him his age when you see him.’

‘And if I don’t want to see him?’

‘You know what you have to do.’

Fred the Clown gave a deep sigh.

‘You wouldn’t have a cigarette on you, would you?’

Maigret took a packet from his drawer and handed it to him.

‘Matches?’

He smoked in silence for a moment or two.

‘Don’t suppose you have anything to drink?’

‘Are you going to talk?’

‘I don’t know yet. I’m wondering if I have anything to say.’

This could go on for ever. Maigret knew the type. On a whim, he went and opened the door to the adjoining inspectors’ room.

‘Lucas! Would you nip down to Quai de Valmy and bring in a woman called Françoise Bidou?’

Immediately, the clown squirmed on his chair and raised his hand like a schoolboy.

‘Inspector! Don’t do that!’

‘Are you going to talk?’

‘I think a little glass of something would help me.’

‘Just a moment, Lucas. Don’t go until I tell you.’

And to Jef:

‘Are you afraid of your wife?’

‘You promised me a drink.’

Closing the door again, Maigret fetched the bottle of brandy he always kept in the cupboard and measured out a shot into a tumbler.

‘You’re going to let me drink on my own?’

‘Well?’

‘Ask away. I’d like to point out that I am making no attempt to obstruct the course of justice, as the lawyers put it.’

‘Where did you meet Monsieur Louis?’

‘On a bench on Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle.’

‘How did you make his acquaintance?’

‘The way you make the acquaintance of someone you meet sitting on a bench. I said it felt like spring and he said that it was milder

than the previous week.'

'That was about two and a half years ago?'

'More or less. I didn't note the date in my diary. We met each other on the same bench on the days that followed, and he seemed pleased to have someone to talk to.'

'Did he tell you he was unemployed?'

'He told me the whole story in the end: how he had worked for the same company for twenty-five years, how the firm was closed down without notice, and how he hadn't dared tell his wife, who, between you and me, seems a right harpy, and was pretending that he was still working in the warehouse. I got the impression that it was the first time he had got it off his chest, and he seemed relieved afterwards.'

'Did he know who you were?'

'I just told him that I had worked in circuses.'

'Then what happened?'

'What do you want to know exactly?'

'Everything.'

'First of all, I'd like you to check my file and add up the number of convictions. I need to know whether one more conviction would mean I get transported. That would bother me greatly.'

Maigret did as he asked.

'Unless we're talking about murder, you still have two convictions to spare.'

'That's what I thought. I wasn't sure if your total was the same as mine.'

'Burglary?'

'It's more complicated than that.'

'Who first thought of it?'

'He did, of course. I'm not cunning enough for that. Have I maybe earned a top-up?'

'Later.'

'Later's a long time. You'll make me tell you everything so fast it will be garbled.'

Maigret backed down and poured him another drink.

'Basically it all started with the bench.'

'What do you mean?'

'Since he spent so much time on the bench – almost always the same one – he began taking notice of all the things going on around him. I don't know if you are familiar with the raincoat shop on the

boulevard?'

'I know the one.'

'The bench where Louis used to sit was right opposite it. So, almost without realizing it, he got to know all the comings and goings in that place, the habits of all the staff. That's what gave him an idea. When you have nothing to do all day, you think, you make plans, sometimes plans you have no intention of ever carrying out. One day he told me about them, just to pass the time. There are always lots of people in that shop. It is full of raincoats of all styles – men's, women's, children's – hanging up in every corner. There is also an upstairs. To the left of the shop, like elsewhere in the neighbourhood, there's an alleyway leading to a courtyard at the back.'

He suggested:

'Do you want me to do you a drawing?'

'Not now. Carry on.'

'Louis said to me:

'"'I wonder why no one's ever robbed the till. It is so simple.'"

'I imagine you pricked up your ears at this?'

'Let's say I was interested. He explained to me that at midday, twelve fifteen at the latest, they showed out the last of the customers and the staff went off for lunch. So did the owner, a little old man with a goatee beard, who had lunch in a restaurant not far from there, La Chope au Nègre.

'"Suppose one of the customers got locked in."

'I know what you're going to say. At first I too thought it was impossible. But Louis had been keeping a watch on the shop for weeks. Before lunch, the staff never bothered to check in all the corners or behind the rows of raincoats to make sure that there was no one left behind. It would never cross their mind that a customer would deliberately want to stay in the shop, you see.

'So that was the key to it. The owner would carefully lock the door when he left.'

'Was it you who got locked in? And then who forced the lock in order to get out with the till?'

'No, you've got that bit wrong. This is the really good part. Even if they'd caught me, they wouldn't have anything on me, because there would be no evidence against me. Sure, I emptied the till. But then I went into the toilets. Next to the cistern there was a small skylight, too small to fit a three-year-old child through, but not to

slip through a package full of banknotes. The skylight opened on to the courtyard. And Louis just happened to be walking past and he collected the package. As for me, I waited calmly until all the staff had got back and there were enough customers so that I wouldn't be noticed. Then I walked out as calmly as I had come in.'

'How did you split the money?'

'Straight down the middle. The hardest thing was deciding to go for it. He had cooked up this plan mainly for his own amusement; he regarded it like a work of art. When I suggested actually doing it, he was shocked. What finally made his mind up was the prospect of having to admit to his wife that he was flat broke. You will have noticed one other advantage to our little plan. I'll be convicted for theft, since I've owned up to it, but it involved no breaking and entering, which means at least two years lopped off the sentence. Am I wrong?'

'We can check the Criminal Code later.'

'I've told you everything. Louis and I had a good time together, and I don't regret a thing. The proceeds from the raincoat shop kept us afloat for three months. To be honest, my share didn't last quite that long, because of my weakness for the nags, but Louis slipped me the odd note now and then.

'Then, when the cash started to run out, we found a new bench.'

'And planned a new robbery?'

'We'd discovered a method that worked; no point in changing the plan. Now that you know how we did it, you will be able to look through your records and work out all the shops that I got myself locked into. The second one was a lighting and electrical shop, further down the boulevard. There wasn't a side-alley there: the back of the shop gave on to the courtyard of a building on the street behind, but that served the same purpose. Most of the toilets in buildings around there had some small opening on to a courtyard or alleyway.

'There was just one occasion when I was caught by a salesgirl. She opened the door of a cupboard where I was hiding. I played the drunk. She called her manager, and they threw me out, threatening to call the police.

'So, after hearing all that, can you give me one good reason why I would have killed Louis? We were pals. I even introduced him to Françoise, to reassure her, because she was wondering what I was up to. He brought her some chocolates, and she thought he was

very distinguished.'

'Did you pull a robbery last week?'

'It was in the papers. A dress shop on Boulevard Montmartre.'

'I assume that when Louis was killed in the alleyway he was on his way to check that the jeweller's had a small window looking out on to the courtyard?'

'Probably. He was always the one who checked out the location because he appeared more respectable than me. People are always suspicious of the likes of me. Even when I'm dressed up smart, they still give me a sideways look.'

'Who killed him?'

'You're asking me that?'

'Who had a reason to kill him?'

'I don't know. Maybe his wife?'

'Why would his wife have killed him?'

'Because she's a vicious old hag. If she had found out that he had been taking her for a ride for the last two years and that he had a girlfriend . . .'

'Do you know his girlfriend?'

'He never introduced me to her, but he told me about her, and I've seen her from a distance. He really liked her. He was a man who needed affection. We all do, really, don't we? I have my Françoise. You probably have someone too. He got on well with her. They went to the cinema or they'd sit in a café together, chatting.'

'Did she know what he did?'

'I'm sure she didn't.'

'Who did know?'

'Well, me, to start with.'

'Obviously.'

'Maybe his daughter. He worried about his daughter a lot. He reckoned she would be like her mother when she got older. She asked him for money all the time.'

'Did you ever go to Rue d'Angoulême?'

'Never.'

'Do you know the house?'

'He pointed it out to me.'

'Why didn't you go inside?'

'Because I didn't want to cause difficulties for him. The landlady thought he was respectable. If she had laid eyes on me . . .'

‘And if I told you that we have found your fingerprints in his room?’

‘I would reply that you are bluffing.’

He seemed to be perfectly calm. He continued to perform his turn, just casting the occasional glance at the bottle.

‘Who else knew?’

‘Listen, inspector, I make no bones about the sort of person I am, but I’ve never snitched on anyone in my life.’

‘You would rather take the blame yourself?’

‘That wouldn’t be fair.’

‘Who else knew?’

‘The girl’s boyfriend. And I wouldn’t bet my shirt on him being innocent. I don’t know if he was just following the girl’s orders, but he spent whole afternoons following Louis around. He went to see him twice to ask for money. Louis was scared stiff that he might tell his wife everything or send her an anonymous letter.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘No. I know he is quite young and that he works mornings in a bookshop. More recently, Louis was expecting everything to blow up. He said it couldn’t last, and sooner or later his wife would discover the truth.’

‘Did he talk to you about his brothers-in-law?’

‘Often. They were held up to him as an example. She used them to show him what a good-for-nothing he was, a failure, a wimp, a nobody, someone who should never have taken on the responsibility of a family if the only thing he could offer was a life of mediocrity. It really gave me a shock.’

‘What did?’

‘When I read in the paper that he was dead. Especially as I wasn’t that far away when it happened. Fernand can vouch for the fact that I was having a drink in his bar.’

‘Was Louis carrying any money?’

‘I don’t know if he had any money on him, but two days earlier we had made quite a big haul.’

‘Was he in the habit of keeping it in his pocket?’

‘In his pocket or in his room. The funny thing is, every evening he would have to go and change his shoes and his tie before catching the train home. Once he forgot to change his tie. He told me the story. He didn’t notice until he was at Gare de Lyon. He couldn’t just buy any old tie. He had to have the one he had on when he left

the house that morning. So he had to go back to Rue d'Angoulême and then tell his wife later that he had been detained at the warehouse on some urgent matter of business.'

'Why haven't you emerged from Françoise's bedroom since Tuesday?'

'What would you have done in my shoes? When I read the paper on Tuesday morning I realized that people had seen me with Louis and they were sure to tell the police all about it. People like me are always the main suspects.'

'Didn't you think about getting out of Paris?'

'I just kept a low profile, in the hope that no one would remember me. This morning, when I heard your inspector calling out to me, I knew the game was up.'

'Does Françoise know what you did?'

'No.'

'Where did she think the money came from?'

'At first, she only saw a small part of it, what I had left after I'd been to the races. Later, she thought I was still picking pockets on the Métro.'

'Did you do that?'

'I don't have to answer, do I? Are you feeling thirsty?'

Maigret poured him one last shot.

'You're sure that's all?'

'As sure as I see you now.'

Maigret opened the door to the adjoining office and said to Lucas:

'Take him to the cells.'

Then, seeing Jef Schrameck stand up with a sigh:

'Best slip the cuffs on him.'

As the Acrobat turned to him with an odd smile on his rubbery face, he added:

'Make sure they're not too hard on him.'

'Thanks, inspector. Please don't tell Françoise that I gambled so much money. She might make me go without my treats.'

Maigret pulled on his coat and picked up his hat with the intention of going to have a quick bite at the Brasserie Dauphine. He was heading down the dusty main stairs when he heard a commotion down below and leaned over the banister to take a look.

A young man with an unruly mop of hair was struggling to break free of the grasp of a police officer, who had a bleeding scratch on his cheek. The officer was grumbling:

‘Will you keep still, you little shit? If you don’t stop, I’m going to give you a slap.’

Maigret tried hard not to laugh. It was Albert Jorisse they were bringing in to see him. The young man continued to struggle and cried out:

‘Let me go! I told you I can walk on my own . . .’

The pair of them reached the landing where Maigret was.

‘I’ve just arrested him on Pont Saint-Michel. I recognized him straight away. When I tried to apprehend him, he made a dash for it.’

‘That’s not true! He’s lying!’

The young man was red in the face, panting, wild-eyed. The police officer was lifting him up by the collar of his coat, as if he were a puppet.

‘Tell him to let me go.’

He swung a kick at the officer but connected only with fresh air.

‘I told you I wanted to see Detective Chief Inspector Maigret. I was on my way to see him. I came of my own accord . . .’

His clothes were crumpled, his trousers were still muddy from the day before. He had big dark rings under his eyes.

‘I’m Inspector Maigret.’

‘Well, then, tell him to let me go.’

‘You can release him, my friend.’

‘If you say so, but . . .’

The officer was expecting the young man to slip out of his hands like an eel.

‘He manhandled me roughly,’ Jorisse panted. ‘He treated me like a . . . a . . .’

He was so angry he couldn’t find the word.

Smiling in spite of himself, Maigret indicated the bleeding wound on the officer’s cheek.

‘On the contrary, it seems as if you . . .’

Jorisse, who apparently hadn’t noticed the gash until now, shouted with flashing eyes:

‘Serves him right!’

8. Monique’s Secret

‘Sit down, you young hooligan.’

‘I’m not a hooligan,’ Jorisse protested.

And then, in a calmer voice, even though he hadn’t yet got his breath back and was still wheezing a little:

‘I never imagined that Detective Chief Inspector Maigret would insult people like this before giving them a chance to explain themselves.’

Maigret was surprised by this and looked at the young man with a frown.

‘Have you eaten?’

‘I’m not hungry.’

He was behaving like a sulky child.

Maigret picked up the phone:

‘Hello! . . . Put me through to the Brasserie Dauphine . . . Hello! Joseph? . . . Maigret here . . . Could you bring up some sandwiches? Six . . . Ham for me . . . Wait . . .’

To Jorisse:

‘Ham or cheese?’

‘I don’t care. Ham.’

‘Beer or red wine?’

‘Water, please. I’m thirsty.’

‘Joseph? Six ham sandwiches, nice and thick, and four beers . . . Wait . . . Bring two cups of coffee while you’re about it . . . Will you be long?’

He hung up and then made a new call, to one of the police departments, without taking his eyes off the young man, whom he examined with curiosity. Jorisse was thin, sickly-looking, with a sort of pathological nervousness that suggested a diet of coffee rather than steak. Apart from that, he wasn’t unattractive. He had

very long dark-brown hair, which he occasionally flicked back with a jerk of his head.

Perhaps because he was still a bit wound up, his nostrils twitched from time to time. With his head to one side, he continued to address a reproachful stare at Maigret.

'Hello! Call off the search for Jorisse. Inform all the police and railway stations.'

The boy opened his mouth, but Maigret didn't give him the chance to speak.

'Later!'

The sky had clouded over again. It was going to rain, and it threatened to be the same relentless downpour as on the day of the funeral. Maigret went to close the window, then, still without a word, he laid out his pipes on his desk in the way that a typist sets up her typewriter, her notepad and her carbon paper before getting down to work.

There was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' Maigret growled.

It was Inspector Neveu, who merely stuck his head round, as he thought the chief would be in full interrogation mode.

'Excuse me. I'd like to know if—'

'You're free to go. Thank you.'

After this, Maigret paced around the room as he waited for the waiter from the Brasserie Dauphine. To pass the time, he made another telephone call, this time to his wife:

'I won't be home for lunch.'

'I was beginning to wonder. Do you know what time it is?'

'No. It doesn't matter.'

She burst out laughing; he didn't find out why.

'I came to tell you . . .'

'Later.'

It was his third interrogation of the day. He was thirsty. He suddenly noticed that the young man was staring at the bottle of brandy and the tumbler that were sitting on the desk.

Maigret blushed like a child, almost feeling that he had to give an explanation, to say that it wasn't he who had drunk cognac out of a large glass but Jef Schrameck, who had been in the office before Albert.

Had the young man's reproach touched a nerve? Was he sorry that he had tarnished the image Albert had of him?

‘Come in, Joseph. Put the tray on the desk. You haven’t forgotten anything, have you?’

Then, when they were alone with their food:

‘Let’s eat.’

Jorisse ate heartily, despite what he had claimed earlier. During the meal he continued to cast curious glances at the inspector and after drinking a glass of beer seemed to recover some of his composure.

‘Feeling better?’

‘Yes, thank you. But you did call me a young hooligan.’

‘We’ll talk about that later.’

‘I wasn’t lying when I said that I was coming to see you.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’ve had enough of hiding.’

‘Why were you hiding?’

‘So as not to be arrested.’

‘Why would you be arrested?’

‘You know very well.’

‘No.’

‘Because I am Monique’s boyfriend.’

‘You were sure that we had discovered that fact?’

‘It wasn’t difficult.’

‘And you think we would have arrested you because you are Monique’s boyfriend?’

‘You want to make me talk.’

‘Indeed!’

‘You believe I will try to lie to you but will end up contradicting myself.’

‘Did you read that in a detective novel?’

‘No. In newspaper reports. I know how you operate.’

‘In that case, what exactly are you here for?’

‘To tell you that I didn’t kill Monsieur Thouret.’

Maigret had lit another pipe and was slowly finishing his second beer. He was sitting at his desk and had lit the lamp with the green shade. The first drops of rain were splashing against the windowpane.

‘You understand the implications of what you said?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘You assumed that we were out to arrest you. So you must think we have good reasons for doing that.’

‘You’ve been to Rue d’Angoulême, haven’t you?’

‘How do you know?’

‘By chance you managed to discover that he had a room in town, if only to have somewhere to change into his yellow shoes.’

An amused smile played across Maigret’s lips.

‘And . . .?’

‘His landlady must have told you that I went to see him.’

‘Is that a reason for arresting you?’

‘You questioned Monique.’

‘And you reckon that she talked?’

‘It would surprise me if you hadn’t made her talk.’

‘In that case, why was your first move to go and hide under one of your friends’ bed?’

‘You know about that as well?’

‘Answer the question.’

‘I wasn’t thinking clearly. I panicked. I was afraid that I’d be beaten up and made to confess to things that aren’t true.’

‘Did you read about that in the papers too?’

After all, the lawyer at René Lecœur’s trial had talked about police brutality, and his words had been splashed all over the press. As it happened, there had been a letter from Lecœur in that morning’s mail. In despair after receiving a death sentence, he had begged Maigret to go and visit him in prison.

Maigret almost showed the boy the letter. He would do so later, if it proved to be necessary.

‘Why did you decide to leave your hiding place in Rue Gay-Lussac?’

‘Because I couldn’t go on spending all day skulking under a bed. It was awful. I was aching all over. I constantly felt as if I needed to sneeze. It’s a small apartment, and the doors were left wide open. I could hear my friend’s aunt coming and going. If I had moved she would have heard me too.’

‘Is that all?’

‘I was hungry.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I wandered the streets. At night, I grabbed an hour or two’s sleep on top of a sack of vegetables at Les Halles. Twice I came as far as Pont Saint-Michel. I saw Monique leaving here. I went to Rue d’Angoulême and from a distance I could see a man who seemed to be standing guard. I assumed he was from the police.’

‘What reason would you have to kill Monsieur Louis?’

‘You don’t know that I borrowed money from him?’

‘Borrowed?’

‘I asked him for some money, if you prefer.’

‘Asked?’

‘What are you implying?’

‘That there are different ways of asking, and some of them don’t really allow much leeway to refuse. To put it in plain French, we’re talking about blackmail.’

Jorisse said nothing but looked at the floor.

‘Answer.’

‘I would never have told Madame Thouret.’

‘Nevertheless, you threatened him that you would?’

‘I didn’t need to.’

‘Because he believed you would tell her?’

‘I don’t know. You’re confusing me with your questions.’

In a tired voice, he added:

‘I’m dying for some sleep.’

‘Drink your coffee.’

He obeyed meekly, never taking his eyes off Maigret.

‘Did you go to see him often?’

‘Just twice.’

‘Did Monique know?’

‘What has she told you?’

‘It’s not about what she said, it’s about finding out the truth.’

‘She knew.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘Who?’

‘Louis Thouret, for pity’s sake.’

‘That we needed money.’

‘Who’s “we”?’

‘Monique and I.’

‘Why?’

‘To go to South America.’

‘You told him of your plan?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did he react?’

‘In the end he agreed that there was no other way.’

Something wasn’t quite right. Maigret could see that the boy thought he knew more than he actually did. He had to play this

carefully.

'Did you say you wanted to marry her?'

'Yes. He knew it was out of the question. Firstly, I'm still a minor, so I need my parents' consent. Secondly, even if I got it, Madame Thouret would never accept a son-in-law without a proper profession. Monsieur Thouret was the first to advise me not to go and see his wife.'

'Did you tell him that you and Monique had made love in hotel rooms on numerous occasions?'

'I didn't go into detail.'

He was blushing again.

'I simply told him she was pregnant.'

Maigret didn't bat an eyelid, didn't display any surprise. But the news had caught him completely off guard. Perhaps he wasn't paying close attention, because it was the one thing that simply hadn't crossed his mind.

'How many months?'

'Just over two months.'

'Have you seen a doctor?'

'I didn't go with her.'

'But she went?'

'Yes.'

'Did you wait for her outside?'

'No.'

He sat back in his chair and mechanically filled a new pipe.

'What were you planning to do in South America?'

'Anything. I'm not scared of anything. I would have worked as a cowboy.'

He said these words with the utmost seriousness and seemed very full of himself. Maigret brought to mind the tall, hulking cowboys he had actually met on ranches in Texas and Arizona.

'Cowboy,' he repeated.

'Or I'd have worked as a gold miner.'

'Naturally.'

'I'd have got by.'

'And you would have married Monique?'

'Yes. It's probably easier over there than here.'

'Do you love Monique?'

'She's my wife, isn't she? Just because we haven't been to the registry office . . .'

‘How did Monsieur Louis react when you told him all this?’

‘He couldn’t believe that his daughter could do such a thing. He cried.’

‘In front of you?’

‘Yes. I swore to him that my intentions were . . .’

‘ . . . honourable. Of course. Then what?’

‘He promised to help us. He couldn’t lay his hands on all the money, but he managed to give me some.’

‘Where is this money?’

‘Monique has it. She hides it in her desk.’

‘And the rest of the money you need?’

‘He promised he’d have it for me by Tuesday. He was expecting a large payment.’

‘From whom?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did he tell you what he did?’

‘He couldn’t, obviously.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because he wasn’t working. I didn’t manage to find out how he got hold of the money. There were two of them.’

‘Did you see the other one?’

‘Once, on the boulevard.’

‘Tall, thin guy with the face of a clown?’

‘Yes.’

‘He was here in this office a short time before you arrived. He’s the one who was drinking that glass of brandy.’

‘So, you know the truth?’

‘I want to know what you know.’

‘Nothing. I assumed they were blackmailing someone.’

‘So you told yourself that there was no reason why you shouldn’t have a slice of the pie?’

‘We needed money – for the baby.’

Maigret picked up the telephone.

‘Lucas? Could you come in for a moment?’

When Lucas arrived, he said:

‘May I introduce Albert Jorisse? He and Monique Thouret are expecting a baby.’

He said this in a very solemn tone and Lucas, not knowing what to think, simply nodded a greeting.

‘The young woman must be at her office now, since she didn’t go

in this morning. Go and find her. Take her to a doctor of her choice. If she doesn't express a preference, take her to the doctor at the Préfecture. I would like to know how many months pregnant she is.'

'What if she won't let him examine her?'

'Tell her that, in that case, I will be obliged to arrest her as well as her boyfriend, who is now in my office. Take the car. Call me and let me know what is the answer.'

When they were alone again, Jorisse asked:

'Why are you doing this?'

'Because it is my duty to double-check everything.'

'You don't believe me?'

'You I believe.'

'So it's her you don't believe?'

In timely fashion the telephone rang, giving Maigret an excuse not to answer. The call was unrelated to the case. Someone was asking for information about a madman who had come to see him a few days earlier and who had been arrested in the street for causing a public disturbance. Rather than giving a short answer, which he could easily have done, Maigret spun the conversation out for as long as possible.

When he hung up again, he pretended he couldn't remember where they had left off and asked:

'What will you do now?'

'Do you believe I didn't kill him?'

'I've never thought that you did. You see, it isn't as easy as people think to stab someone in the back. It is even harder to kill someone without them crying out.'

'You think I'd be incapable of that?'

'Definitely.'

He seemed almost peeved at this. He did, of course, see himself as a cowboy or gold miner in South America.

'Will you go and see Madame Thouret?'

'I suppose I'll have to.'

Maigret almost burst out laughing at the thought of the young man in the house in Juvisy, buttocks clenched, making small talk with Monique's mother.

'Do you think she will accept you as a son-in-law now?'

'I don't know.'

'You haven't been entirely straight with me, have you? Admit it.'

'What do you mean?'

‘You didn’t just ask Monsieur Louis for money to pay for the journey to South America. As Monique didn’t work in the office in the afternoon but was out collecting money in town, you wanted to be with her.

‘It was always possible to find an hour or two in her schedule, and you went off to some rented room together.’

‘It did happen like that sometimes, yes.’

‘So you were able only to work mornings in the bookshop. And hotel rooms cost money.’

‘We did spend a little bit of the money . . .’

‘Do you know where Monsieur Louis put his money?’

He was carefully observing the young man, who said without hesitation:

‘On top of his wardrobe.’

‘Is that where he got the cash that he gave to you?’

‘Yes. But I knew already, from Monique.’

‘I assume you didn’t go to Rue d’Angoulême on Monday?’

‘It’s easy enough to check. The landlady will tell you. I was meant to go there at five o’clock on Tuesday.’

‘When were you going to set sail?’

‘Our boat was in three weeks. That gave us enough time to sort out our visas. I have already applied for my passport.’

‘I thought that parental authorization was required in the case of minors.’

‘I forged my father’s signature.’

There was a silence. For the first time Jorisse asked:

‘May I smoke?’

Maigret nodded. Curiously, now he had drunk his coffee, he really fancied a glass of brandy but he didn’t dare retrieve the bottle, which he had put back in the cupboard.

‘You called me a hooligan.’

‘And what do you think about that?’

‘I could hardly behave any other way.’

‘Would you like it if your son acted the way you did?’

‘I will bring up my son differently. He won’t have to—’

They were interrupted by the telephone again.

‘Is that you, chief?’

Maigret frowned when he heard Neveu’s voice, since he hadn’t sent him on any particular errand.

‘I’ve got the money.’

‘What are you saying?’

He looked at Jorisse, then interrupted his inspector:

‘Just a moment, I’m going to another phone.’

He went into the next-door office and picked an officer at random to go and keep an eye on the young man.

‘OK. I’m listening. Where are you?’

‘Quai de Valmy. In a bar.’

‘What are you doing there?’

‘Are you annoyed?’

‘Talk.’

‘I thought I was doing the right thing. Jef has been living with Françoise for ten years now. From what I’ve heard, he’s more attached to her than he makes out. I just had an urge to have a look around at their place.’

‘Why?’

‘It struck me as odd that he should have left her without any money. I was lucky enough to find her at home. They have only two rooms, then a sort of cupboard that serves as their kitchen. In the bedroom there is an iron bed with brass knobs on it. The walls are whitewashed, like in a country house, but it is very clean.’

Maigret waited patiently for the end of the story, in a bad mood. He didn’t like it when his men overstepped the mark, particularly when the officer in question, like Neveu, was not part of his department.

‘Did you tell her that Jef has been arrested?’

‘Did I do wrong?’

‘Just continue.’

‘First of all, from her reaction, I was sure that she had no idea what he did. Her first thought was that he had been caught lifting a wallet in the Métro or on a bus. I guess that’s what he does.’

It was one of Schrameck’s talents even when he was still working the fairs; one of his convictions was for pickpocketing.

‘Despite her protests, I started searching the apartment. In the end I had the idea of unscrewing the brass bedknobs. The iron bars on the bed were hollow. In two of them I found rolls of banknotes. There was quite a tidy sum there! Françoise couldn’t believe her eyes!

‘“To think he had all this money and he sent me out to do cleaning! Well, he can’t take it with him to heaven. Just wait till he gets home . . .”

‘She carried on ranting, calling him every name under the sun. She only calmed down when I told her that he must have put this money aside in case anything ever happened to him.

‘“I wonder how he managed to resist betting it on the horses!” she grumbled.

‘So, do you see now, chief? Last Saturday they must have shared out a large haul. I’ve got more than 200,000 francs here. Jef couldn’t have bet that much money, especially at Fernand’s. He must only have lost a part of it. So if they split the money fifty-fifty, Monsieur Louis would have had a big wad too.’

‘Thank you.’

‘What shall I do with the money?’

‘Did you bring it with you?’

‘Yes, just in case. I couldn’t leave it there.’

‘Go and see your chief inspector and ask him to do this all over again, this time by the book.’

‘You mean I have to—’

‘Dammit! I’m not going to let the lawyers make out that we planted the money.’

‘Have I screwed up?’

‘Somewhat.’

‘I’m sorry. I just wanted to—’

Maigret hung up. Torrence was in the office.

‘Are you busy?’

‘Nothing that can’t wait.’

‘Go and find Detective Chief Inspector Antoine. Ask him to get his men to draw up a list of robberies from shops on the Grands Boulevards over the last two and a half years, particularly robberies that took place at midday, when the shops were closed for lunch.’

These thefts didn’t come under his jurisdiction but were handled by Antoine’s department, whose offices were at the other end of the corridor.

He went back to Albert Jorisse, who had just lit another cigarette, and sent out the officer he had put in charge of keeping an eye on him.

‘I wasn’t going to run away.’

‘It could happen. Or maybe you would have been tempted to take a peek at the files in my desk. Go on, admit it. Would you have done that?’

‘Maybe.’

‘That makes all the difference.’

‘What does?’

‘No matter. I know what I mean.’

‘What are you going to do with me?’

‘Nothing for the moment. We’re just going to wait.’

Maigret looked at his watch and reckoned that Lucas and Monique must be at the doctor’s by now, leafing through magazines in the waiting room.

‘You despise me, don’t you?’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘I never had a chance.’

‘Chance to do what?’

‘Get away.’

‘Get away from what?’

His tone was almost aggressive.

‘I can see that you don’t understand. If you had spent your childhood having to listen to nothing but talk about money, with a mother who would get into a state whenever it got towards the end of the month—’

‘I didn’t have a mother.’

The young man stopped talking. The next ten minutes passed in total silence. For a good while Maigret stood at the window, his back to the room, watching the rain trace lines on the windowpane. Then he started pacing up and down and finally opened the cupboard door with a rather determined gesture. He had previously washed the water glass in the wash-basin; he gave it another rinse and poured out a shot of brandy.

‘I don’t suppose you want one?’

‘No, thank you.’

Albert Jorisse was struggling to stay awake. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes must have been smarting. Every now and again, he rocked on his chair.

‘Maybe you’ll be a man one day after all.’

He heard footsteps in the corridor, a man and a woman, and he knew it was Lucas bringing in Monique. He had to make a decision, one he had been pondering for the last quarter of an hour. He could show the young woman in here or he could receive her in the next-door office.

With a shrug of the shoulders he went to open the door. They both had raindrops on their shoulders. Monique didn’t seem so self-

assured, and when she spotted Albert she froze, gripping her bag with both hands and shooting Maigret an angry look.

'Did you take her to the doctor's?'

'At first, she didn't want to go. I—'

'The result?'

Jorisse had stood up and looked at her as if he were about to throw himself at her feet to ask her forgiveness.

'Negative.'

'She's not pregnant?'

'She never has been.'

Jorisse couldn't believe his ears. He didn't know which way to turn. He seemed to be about to take it out on Maigret, whom he apparently regarded as the cruellest man on earth.

Maigret closed the door and ushered Monique to a chair.

'Do you have anything to say?'

'I believed—'

'No.'

'What do you know about it? You're not a woman.'

She turned to the young man:

'I swear to you, Albert, that I really did believe that we were going to have a baby.'

Maigret spoke, in a calm and neutral voice:

'How long?'

'A few days.'

'And then?'

'Then I didn't want to let him down.'

'Let him down?'

Maigret gave Lucas a look, and the latter followed him into the next-door office. They closed the door behind them, leaving the two lovers alone.

'As soon as I mentioned seeing a doctor I could tell there was something fishy going on. She protested. It was only when I threatened to arrest her and Albert . . .'

Maigret wasn't listening. He knew all this already. Torrence was back at his desk.

'Did you do what I asked you?'

'They're drawing up the list now. It'll be a long one. Inspector Antoine's team have been working themselves into the ground on these cases for the last two years. It seems that . . .'

Maigret went up to the communicating door and put his ear to it.

‘What are they doing?’ asked Lucas.

‘Nothing.’

‘They aren’t talking?’

‘Not a word.’

He went to the chief’s office and brought him up to date. They chatted about this and that. For the next hour Maigret popped into various offices to consult with colleagues.

When he returned to his own office, it was as if Albert and Monique hadn’t moved a muscle. They were both sitting in the same chairs with three metres’ distance between them. The young girl was stony-faced, her jaw set firm, making her look like her mother and her aunts.

When her eyes happened to fall on the young man, it was hard to tell the exact proportion of contempt and hatred in her gaze.

As for Jorisse, he was dejected. His eyes were red, either from lack of sleep or from crying.

‘You’re free to go,’ Maigret said simply as he headed for his chair.

It was Monique who asked the question:

‘Will this be in the papers?’

‘There’s no reason why the papers need to talk about it.’

‘Will my mother hear about it?’

‘That won’t be necessary.’

‘And my employers?’

When he shook his head, she sprang to her feet and headed for the door without a single glance at Jorisse. With her hand on the doorknob she turned to Maigret and said:

‘Admit that you did it deliberately.’

He said ‘yes’. Then he sighed:

‘You’re free to go too.’

Then, as the young man didn’t move:

‘Aren’t you going to run after her?’

She was already heading down the stairs.

‘Do you think I should?’

‘What did she say to you?’

‘She called me an idiot.’

‘Is that all?’

‘She said that I was never to speak to her again.’

‘Then?’

‘Nothing. I don’t know.’

‘You can go.’

‘What will I tell my parents?’

‘Whatever you like. They will be overjoyed to see you safe.’

‘Do you think so?’

He almost pushed him out. He still seemed to have something he wanted to get off his chest.

‘Go, you idiot!’

‘Do you still think I’m a hooligan?’

‘No, an idiot! She got it right.’

He turned his head away to sniffle and murmured:

‘Thank you.’

After which, alone in his office, Maigret could finally pour himself that glass of brandy.

9. Coméliau Grows Impatient

‘Is that you, Maigret?’

‘Yes, Monsieur Coméliau.’

It was their daily telephone conversation, and if Maigret had had one of his colleagues in the office he would have given him a wink. He always put on his blandest voice when he was talking to the examining magistrate.

‘The Thouret business?’

‘Getting there! Getting there!’

‘Don’t you think this one is dragging on a bit?’

‘Well, you know these sorts of crime always take an age.’

‘And you are convinced this is a violent mugging?’

‘You said it yourself at the start: “It’s as plain as the nose on your face.”’

‘Do you believe what Schrameck told you?’

‘I’m sure he was telling the truth.’

‘In that case, who killed Louis Thouret?’

‘Someone who wanted his money.’

‘Well, just try to speed things up a bit, would you?’

‘You have my word, sir.’

But he did nothing more about it. Instead, he turned his attention to two other cases, which occupied most of his time. Three of his men, among them Janvier and young Lapointe, were taking it in turns to keep an eye on the house in Rue d’Angoulême, round the clock. The telephone was still being tapped.

Nor did he pay any further attention to Madame Thouret, or her daughter, or young Jorisse who was once again working full days at the bookshop in Boulevard Saint-Michel. It was as if he had never known them.

As for the robbery, he had passed the file over to his colleague

Antoine, who was questioning Jef Schrameck, known as the Acrobat, on an almost daily basis. Maigret frequently bumped into him in the corridor.

'How's it going?'

'Good, inspector.'

It was cold, but it wasn't raining any more. The landlady in Rue d'Angoulême hadn't found any new tenants so she still had two empty rooms. As for the three girls who lived there, knowing that the building was under surveillance, they didn't dare practise their normal profession. They hardly ever went out, except to have a meal in a local restaurant or to buy some food at the nearby delicatessen; occasionally one of them might go to the cinema.

'What do they do all day?' Maigret asked Janvier one time.

'They sleep, play cards with each other or patience on their own. One of them, called Arlette, always sticks her tongue out at me when she sees me through the curtains. Yesterday she rang the changes: she turned round, hitched up her dressing gown and showed me her behind.'

The Flying Squad in Marseille were looking into the knife. The search had extended beyond the town itself into the surrounding areas. They were also investigating various known criminals who had 'gone up' to Paris in recent months.

So everything was proceeding in a methodical fashion, but there had been no obvious breakthrough. However, Maigret hadn't forgotten about Monsieur Louis. Once, when he had to go to Rue de Clignancourt on another matter, he stopped the car outside Léone's shop. He had had the foresight to buy a cream cake for the old lady.

'Have you found anything out yet?'

'We will, one day soon.'

He didn't speak to the former typist about what Monsieur Louis had been up to.

'Do you know why he was killed?'

'For his money.'

'Did he earn that much?'

'He was making a good living.'

'Poor man! To be killed just as life was starting to go well for him!'

He didn't visit Monsieur Saimbron in his rooms but bumped into him at the flower market, and they greeted each other.

Finally, one morning, he was told there was a call from Marseille.

He had a long conversation on the phone, after which he went upstairs to Records, where he spent an hour reading through forms. He then went downstairs to Archives, where he spent a similar amount of time.

It was around eleven o'clock when he got into the car.

'Rue d'Angoulême.'

Young Lapointe was on duty outside the house.

'Is everyone at home?'

'One of them has gone out. She's doing her shopping.'

'Which one?'

'Olga. The dark-haired one.'

He rang the bell. A curtain twitched. Mariette Gibon, the landlady, came to the door in her slippers.

'Well, if it isn't the big chief in person! Aren't your men tired of pounding the pavement outside my door all day and night?'

'Is Arlette in?'

'Do you want me to call her?'

'No, thank you. I'd rather just go up.'

She stood in the hallway, looking perturbed, as he climbed the stairs and knocked on the door on the first floor.

'Come in.'

She was wearing a dressing gown, as usual, and was lying on her unmade bed, reading a cheap romance.

'Oh, it's you.'

'Yes, it's me,' he said, placing his hat on the sideboard and sitting down on a chair.

She seemed both surprised and amused.

'So it's not sorted out yet, this business?'

'It won't be sorted out until we find the killer.'

'You haven't found him yet? And I thought you were so cunning. It doesn't bother you, does it, me lying here in my dressing gown?'

'Not at all.'

'You must be used to it by now.'

She shuffled on the bed and her dressing gown fell open. As Maigret appeared not to notice, she said sharply:

'That's all the effect it has on you?'

'What?'

'Seeing this.'

He still didn't react, and she grew impatient. She made a shameless gesture and said:

‘How about it?’

‘Thank you.’

‘Yes, thank you?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘Well I never . . .’

‘Does it amuse you to be vulgar?’

‘Are you going to give me a hard time, on top of everything else?’

Nevertheless, she pulled her dressing gown together again and sat up on the edge of the bed.

‘What do you want from me exactly?’

‘Do your parents still think that you are working in Avenue Matignon?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You worked for Hélène and Hélène’s, the milliner in Avenue Matignon, for a year.’

‘So what?’

‘I am just wondering whether your father knows you have changed profession.’

‘Is that any of your business?’

‘He’s a good man, your father.’

‘He’s all right, for an old fogey, yes.’

‘If he found out what you actually do . . .’

‘Are you intending to tell him?’

‘Maybe.’

This time, she couldn’t disguise her agitation.

‘Have you been to Clermont-Ferrand? Have you seen my parents?’

‘Not yet . . .’

She got up and dashed to the door, which she tugged open, to reveal Mariette Gibon, who must have been standing with her ear to the door panel.

‘Don’t mind me!’

‘Can I come in?’

‘No, you can’t. Now clear off. And if I ever catch you spying on me again . . .’

Maigret had not moved from his chair.

‘Well?’ he said.

‘Well what? What is it that you want?’

‘You know full well.’

‘No. I prefer to have it spelled out for me.’

‘You’ve lived in this house for six months.’

‘And . . .?’

‘You’re here most of the day and you know what goes on.’

‘Carry on.’

‘There is a person who used to come here regularly but who hasn’t set foot here since the death of Monsieur Louis.’

Her pupils seemed to contract. Again, she got up and went to the door, but there was no one there this time.

‘Well, it wasn’t me this person came to see.’

‘Who, then?’

‘I’m sure you know already. I think I’d better get dressed.’

‘Why?’

‘Because once we’ve had this conversation, I really shouldn’t hang around here any more.’

She slipped off her dressing gown, this time without any ulterior motive, picked up some underwear and opened the wardrobe.

‘I should have known it would end like this.’

She was talking to herself.

‘You’re a clever one, aren’t you?’

‘It’s my job to catch criminals.’

‘Have you arrested him?’

She had picked out a black dress and was now applying some red lipstick.

‘Not yet.’

‘Do you know who he is?’

‘You’re going to tell me.’

‘You seem very sure of that.’

He took his wallet out his pocket and extracted a photo of a man in his thirties with a scar on his left temple. She glanced at it and said nothing.

‘Is that him?’

‘You seem to think so.’

‘Am I wrong?’

‘Where will I go while you are arresting him?’

‘Somewhere one of my officers can take care of you.’

‘Which one?’

‘Which one would you prefer?’

‘The dark one with all the hair.’

‘Inspector Lapointe.’

Returning to the photo, Maigret asked:

‘What do you know about Marco?’

‘He’s the landlady’s boyfriend. Do we have to talk about this here?’

‘Where is he?’

She didn’t reply, but instead started stuffing her dresses and personal possessions willy-nilly into a large suitcase, seemingly in a hurry to leave the house.

‘We’ll continue this conversation outside.’

And as he leaned over to take her bag:

‘Well, at least you’re a gentleman.’

The door to the little living room downstairs was open. Mariette Gibon was standing in the doorway, motionless, her face drawn, an anxious look in her eyes.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Wherever the inspector is taking me.’

‘Are you arresting her?’

She didn’t dare say another word. She watched them leave, then went to the window and raised the curtain. Maigret put her suitcase inside the car and said to Lapointe:

‘I’m going to send someone to relieve you. As soon as he arrives, come and join us at the Brasserie de la République.’

‘All right, chief.’

He gave instructions to the driver but didn’t get in the car.

‘Come.’

‘To the Brasserie de la République?’

‘For the time being, yes.’

It was a short distance away. They installed themselves at a table at the back.

‘I have to make a telephone call. It would be better for you not to try to get away.’

‘Understood.’

He called headquarters and gave some instructions to Torrence. When he came back to the table, he ordered two aperitifs.

‘Where is Marco?’

‘I don’t know. When you came, the landlady made me telephone him to tell him not to call or come round until further notice.’

‘At what point did you make the call?’

‘Half an hour after you left, from a restaurant in Boulevard Voltaire.’

‘Did you speak to him in person?’

‘No. I phoned a waiter in the bar in Rue de Douai.’

‘His name?’

‘Félix.’

‘The bar?’

‘The Poker d’As.’

‘Has she had any news of him since?’

‘No. She’s suffering. She is very aware that she is twenty years older than him and she is always imagining him hanging out with girls.’

‘Does he have the money?’

‘I don’t know. He came that day.’

‘Which day?’

‘The Monday that Monsieur Louis was killed.’

‘What time was it when he came to Rue d’Angoulême?’

‘Around five o’clock. They shut themselves away in the landlady’s bedroom.’

‘Did she go into Monsieur Louis’ room?’

‘She may have done. I didn’t notice. He left after an hour or so. I heard the door close.’

‘Did she try to communicate with him through one of you?’

‘She thought that we would be followed.’

‘Did she suspect that the telephone was tapped?’

‘She wasn’t fooled by your trick with the pipe. She is a sly one. I’m not that keen on her, but I feel sorry for her. She’s crazy about him. It’s like a sickness.’

Lapointe arrived to find them sitting peacefully together at the table.

‘What’ll you have?’

The girl was eyeing him up with a smile, but he was too shy to return her gaze.

‘What you’re having.’

‘I want you to take her to a quiet hotel with two adjoining rooms. Don’t leave her until I give you the signal. As soon as you book in, telephone me to let me know where you are. You don’t have to go very far. You’ll probably find the Hôtel Moderne across the street has suitable rooms. She should see no one and get all her meals through room service.’

As she walked off with Lapointe it looked more like she was taking him into custody than vice versa.

It was another two days before this played itself out. Someone –

they never found out who – must have alerted Félix, the barman in Rue de Douai. He had hidden himself at a friend's house and wasn't discovered until the following evening.

It took most of the night to get him to admit that he knew Marco and to cough up his address.

Marco had left Paris and checked into an anglers' inn up the Seine, where, at this time of year, he was the only guest.

Before he was overpowered he managed to fire off two shots, which didn't hit anyone. He was carrying the money stolen from Monsieur Louis in a belt that Mariette Gibon must have made for him.

'Is that you, Maigret?'

'Yes, Monsieur Coméliau.'

'The Thouret case?'

'It's over. I'll be sending you the killer and his accomplice in due course.'

'Who is it? Was it some low-life mugging as we thought?'

'The lowest of the low. The landlady of a bawdy house and her lover, some thug from Marseille. Monsieur Louis was so naive that he hid his money on top of his wardrobe and . . .'

'What are you saying?'

'He couldn't be allowed to find out that the money wasn't there any more. Marco took care of that. We found where he bought the knife. You will have my report by this evening . . .'

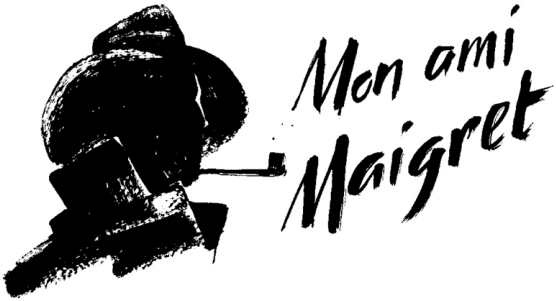
This was the most boring part. Maigret stuck to it all afternoon, writing with his tongue between his teeth, like a schoolboy.

That evening, he had just finished eating dinner when he remembered Arlette and young Lapointe.

'Damn! I've forgotten something!' he exclaimed.

'Is it important?' asked Madame Maigret.

'No, not really. It's late now. It can wait till morning. Shall we go to bed?'


Mon ami
Maigret

GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret is Afraid
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

1. A Train Journey in the Rain

All of a sudden, between two small stations whose names he didn't know and of which he could see almost nothing in the dark, apart from the slashing rain in the beam of a large lamp and human shapes pushing carts, Maigret wondered what he was doing there.

Perhaps he'd dozed off for a moment in the overheated compartment? He couldn't have lost consciousness entirely because he knew he was on a train – he could hear its steady chugging. He would have sworn that he'd occasionally seen the lit windows of an isolated farmhouse dotted among the dark expanses of countryside. All these things were real, as were the smell of soot mingled with that of his damp clothes and the regular murmur of voices from an adjacent compartment, but everything had somehow lost its immediacy, it could no longer be located in space or, more specifically, in time.

He could have been elsewhere, in any dinky train travelling across the countryside, and he could have been a fifteen-year-old Maigret coming home from school on a Saturday, on a local train exactly like this one, with old-fashioned carriages whose partitions creaked as the engine strained. There would bethe same voices in the dark at each stop, the same men busying themselves around the mail compartment, the same stationmaster's whistle.

He half-opened his eyes, puffed on his pipe, which had gone out, and his gaze lighted on the man sitting in the opposite corner of the compartment. He could have been a passenger on the train that once used to take Maigret to his father's. He could have been the count or the owner of the château, the dignitary of a village or of any small town.

He wore a light tweed golfing suit and the sort of raincoat that is sold only in very expensive shops. He had a green hunting hat, with

a tiny pheasant plume tucked under the ribbon. Despite the heat, he hadn't taken off his fawn gloves, for those people never remove their gloves on a train or in a car. And, despite the rain, there wasn't a spot of mud on his immaculately shiny shoes.

He looked about sixty-five. An elderly gentleman. Isn't it curious how men of that age pay so much attention to every detail of their appearance? And how they still like to pretend they are different from common mortals?

His complexion was the pink that is peculiar to his kind, and he had a thin silver-white moustache stained yellow from smoking cigars.

His gaze, however, did not contain all the assurance one might have expected. From his corner, the man was watching Maigret who, meanwhile, darted little glances in his direction and twice or three times looked as if he were on the verge of saying something. Theytrain set off again, grimy and wet, into a dark world punctuated by scattered lights. Sometimes, at a level-crossing, you could just make out a person on a bicycle waiting for the convoy to pass.

Was Maigret sad? It was a more nebulous mood. He wasn't feeling completely at ease with himself. And for a start, he had drunk too much these past three days, but it had been an obligation, not a pleasure.

He was on his way back from the international police congress which had been held in Bordeaux. It was April. When he had left Paris, where the winter had been long and dreary, it had felt as if spring was around the corner. But, in Bordeaux, it had rained non-stop for three days, with a cold wind that plastered your clothes to your body.

It so happened that the few friends he usually met at these congresses, like Mr Pyke, were not there. Each country seemed to have contrived to send only youngsters, men of thirty to forty who were new faces. They had all been very kind to him, very deferential, as people are towards an elder they respect but consider a bit out of touch.

Was it all a figment of his imagination, or had the never-ending rain made him grumpy? Or was it all the wine they'd had to drink at all the wineries they had visited at the invitation of the Chamber of Commerce?

'Are you having a good time?' his wife had asked him on the

telephone.

He had replied with a groan.

'Try and have a bit of a rest. You looked tired when you left. Anyway, it will be a change of scene. Don't catch cold.'

Perhaps he was suddenly feeling old? Not even their discussions, which had nearly all been about new scientific techniques, had interested him.

The dinner had been held the previous evening. That morning there had been a closing reception, at the town hall this time, and a lunch washed down with copious amounts of wine. He had promised Chabot that he would take advantage of the fact that he didn't have to be in Paris until the Monday morning to drop in and see him in Fontenay-le-Comte.

Chabot wasn't getting any younger either. They had been friends long ago, when Maigret had been a medical student for two years at Nantes University. Chabot had been studying law. They had shared lodgings. On two or three occasions, on a Sunday, he had gone with his friend to visit his mother in Fontenay.

And since then, over the years, they had seen each other maybe ten times in all.

'When are you going to come and look me up in Vendée?'

Madame Maigret had encouraged him.

'Why don't you go and see your friend Chabot on the way back from Bordeaux?'

He should have arrived in Fontenay two hours ago, but he had taken the wrong train. In Niort, where he had waited for ages, drinking small glasses of wine in the waiting room, he had been tempted to telephone Chabot to ask him to drive over and pick him up.

But he hadn't done so in the end because, if Julien came to fetch him, he would insist on his staying the night, and Maigret hated sleeping in other people's houses.

He would go to a hotel and telephone only once he was settled in. He had been wrong to make this detour instead of spending these two days' holiday at home, on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. Who knows? Maybe it wasn't raining in Paris and spring had finally arrived.

'So they've brought you down here . . .'

He gave a start. Without realizing it, he must have continued vaguely staring at his travelling companion, who had just made up

his mind to speak to him. This seemed to be causing him some embarrassment and he felt obliged to add a note of irony to his words.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I said I was certain they'd turn to someone like you.'

Then, since Maigret still looked bemused:

'You are Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, aren't you?'

The passenger became a man of the world again and rose from the banquette to introduce himself:

'Vernoux de Courçon.'

'Pleased to meet you.'

'I recognized you immediately from having seen your photograph in the newspapers.'

From the way he said it, he sounded as if he were apologizing for being someone who read the papers.

'It must happen often.'

'What?'

'That people recognize you.'

Maigret didn't know what to reply. He hadn't come fully back down to earth yet. There were beads of sweat on the man's forehead, as if he had put himself in a situation from which he didn't know how to extricate himself.

'Was it my friend Julien who telephoned you?'

'Do you mean Julien Chabot?'

'The investigating magistrate. What surprises me is that he said nothing to me about it when I saw him this morning.'

'I still don't understand.'

Vernoux de Courçon studied him more closely, frowning.

'Are you saying it's coincidence that brings you to Fontenay-le-Comte?'

'Yes.'

'You're not on your way to Julien Chabot's?'

'I am, but . . .'

Maigret suddenly blushed, furious with himself, because he had just answered meekly, as he had done in the past with people like the man facing him, 'the upper crust'.

'Odd, isn't it?' said Vernoux de Courçon, wryly.

'What is odd?'

'That Detective Chief Inspector Maigret, who has probably never set foot in Fontenay—'

‘Is that what you’ve been told?’

‘I presume so. In any case, we haven’t seen you there often and I’ve never heard mention of any visits. I was saying it’s odd that you turn up just when the authorities are having to deal with the most perplexing mystery that . . .’

Maigret struck a match and gave little puffs on his pipe.

‘Julien Chabot and I were students together for a while,’ he said calmly. ‘In the past, I was an occasional guest at his home in Rue Clemenceau.’

‘Really?’

Taciturnly, he echoed:

‘Really.’

‘In that case, we’ll probably see one another tomorrow evening at my house, Rue Rabelais, where Chabot comes every Saturday to play bridge.’

They stopped one last time before Fontenay. Vernoux de Courçon had no luggage, only a brown leather briefcase lying next to him on the seat.

‘I’m intrigued to know whether you will solve the mystery. Coincidence or not, it’s lucky for Chabot that you are here.’

‘Is his mother still alive?’

‘As hale and hearty as ever.’

The man rose to button up his raincoat, stretch his gloves and adjust his hat. The train was slowing down, lights flashed past more frequently and people on the platform started running.

‘Delighted to have met you. Tell Chabot I hope you’ll join him tomorrow evening.’

Maigret merely nodded in reply, opened the compartment door, grabbed his suitcase, which was heavy, and made for the train door without looking at the people he passed.

Chabot couldn’t be expecting him on that train, which he had only taken by chance. From the station entrance, Maigret could see all the way down Rue de la République, where it was raining even harder.

‘Taxi, sir?’

He nodded.

‘Hôtel de France?’

He replied yes again and slumped in the back of the cab, feeling irritable. It was only nine o’clock in the evening, but the town was dead, and only two or three cafés still had their lights on. The door

of the Hôtel de France was flanked by two palm trees in green barrels.

'Do you have a room?'

'For one?'

'Yes. And if possible I'd like something to eat.'

The hotel had already closed for the night, like a church after vespers. The receptionist had to go and check with the kitchen. He turned on two or three lamps in the dining room.

Maigret washed his hands at a porcelain basin to avoid having to go up to his room.

'White wine?'

He was nauseated by all the white wine he had been obliged to drink in Bordeaux.

'Do you have any beer?'

'Only bottled.'

'Then give me a decent red.'

They heated up some soup for him and sliced some ham. From where he was sitting, he saw someone enter the lobby, dripping wet. Finding no one at the desk, the newcomer glanced around the dining room and looked relieved on spotting Maigret. Aged around forty, he had ginger hair and plump red cheeks, and cameras were slung over the shoulders of his beige raincoat.

He shook the rain from his hat and came into the room.

'First of all, may I take a photo? I'm the regional correspondent from the *Ouest-Éclair*. I saw you at the station, but I wasn't able to catch you. So they've asked you to come and shed light on the Courçon cacse.'

A flash. A click.

'Inspector Féron didn't tell us about you. Nor did the investigating magistrate.'

'I am not here for the Courçon case.'

The ginger-haired journalist smiled the smile of a hack who is not fooled.

'Of course not!'

'What do you mean, "of course not"?'

'You're not here *officially*. I get it. All the same—'

'All the same, nothing!'

'The proof is that Féron told me he's on his way.'

'Who is Féron?'

'Fontenay's police chief. When I spotted you at the station, I raced

over to the telephone booth and called him. He said he'd meet me here.'

'*Here?*'

'Of course. Where else would you be staying?'

Maigret drained his glass, wiped his mouth and muttered:

'Who is this Vernoux de Courçon with whom I travelled from Niort?'

'He was indeed on that train. He's the brother-in-law.'

'Whose brother-in-law?'

'Of the De Courçon who's been murdered.'

A short figure with brown hair now came into the hotel and made a beeline for the two men in the dining room.

'Hello, Féron!' said the journalist.

'Hello, you. My apologies, detective chief inspector. No one told me you were coming, which is why I wasn't at the station. I was having a bite to eat, after an exhausting day, when—'

He jerked his head in the journalist's direction.

'I raced over and—'

'I was saying to this young man,' replied Maigret, pushing away his plate and picking up his pipe, 'that I have nothing to do with your Courçon case. I'm in Fontenay-le-Comte through the greatest of coincidences, to say hello to my good old friend Chabot and—'

'Does he know you're here?'

'He must have been expecting me on the four o'clock train. When he saw I wasn't on it, he probably assumed I'd only be coming tomorrow or that I wouldn't be coming at all.'

Maigret stood up.

'And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to drop in and say hello before I go to bed.'

The police chief and the reporter both looked equally disconcerted.

'Do you really know nothing?'

'Absolutely nothing.'

'You haven't read the papers?'

'For the past three days, the congress organizers and the Bordeaux Chamber of Commerce ensured that we didn't have the leisure.'

They exchanged sceptical glances.

'Do you know where Chabot lives?'

'Of course I do. Unless the town has changed since I was last

here.'

They couldn't bring themselves to let him go. Outside on the pavement, they lingered beside him.

'Gentlemen, I wish you good night.'

The reporter pressed him:

'Do you have anything to say to the *Ouest-Éclair*?'

'Nothing. Goodnight, gentlemen.'

He reached Rue de la République, crossed the bridge and passed only two people on his way to Chabot's. His friend lived in an old house which had once been the envy of the young Maigret. It was still the same, built of grey stone with four steps up to the front door, and tall windows. A little light filtered through the gap in the curtains. He rang the bell and heard footsteps on the blue tiles in the hall. A spy hole in the door opened.

'Is Monsieur Chabot at home?' he asked.

'Who is it?'

'Inspector Maigret.'

'Is that you, Monsieur Maigret?'

He recognized the voice of Rose, the Chabots' servant, who was already with them thirty years earlier.

'I'll let you in right away. Just wait while I undo the chain.'

As she did so, she shouted into the house:

'Monsieur Julien! It's your friend Monsieur Maigret . . . Come in, Monsieur Maigret . . . Monsieur Julien went to the station this afternoon . . . He was disappointed when you didn't show up. How did you get here?'

'By train.'

'You mean the local evening train?'

A door had opened. Standing in the shaft of orange light was a tall, thin, slightly stooped figure in a brown-velvet smoking jacket.

'Is that you?' he said.

'Of course it is. I missed the fast train, so I took the slow one.'

'Your luggage?'

'It's at the hotel.'

'Are you mad? I'll have to send for it. We agreed that you would stay here.'

'Now look, Julien . . .'

It was funny. He had to force himself to call his old friend by his first name and it sounded odd. It didn't come naturally to be familiar with him.

‘Come in! I hope you haven’t had dinner?’

‘I have. At the Hôtel de France.’

‘Shall I inform Madame?’ asked Rose.

Maigret interrupted.

‘I imagine she’s in bed?’

‘She’s just gone upstairs. But she doesn’t go to bed before eleven o’clock or midnight. I—’

‘No. I forbid you to disturb her. I’ll see your mother tomorrow morning.’

‘She won’t be happy.’

Maigret calculated that Madame Chabot must be at least seventy-eight. He was secretly wishing he hadn’t come. But all the same he hung his rain-sodden overcoat on the antique coat rack and followed Julien into his study, while Rose, who was over sixty herself, waited for orders.

‘What will you have? A vintage brandy?’

‘If you like.’

Rose understood the magistrate’s unspoken instructions and left the room. The smell of the house hadn’t changed and that was something else that Maigret had once envied, the smell of a well-kept home, where the wooden floors are polished and the food is good.

He would have sworn that every single piece of furniture was in the same place.

‘Do sit down. It’s good to see you . . .’

He would have been tempted to say that Chabot hadn’t changed either. He recognized his features, his expression. Since they had both aged, Maigret barely realized that the years had taken their toll. All the same, he was struck by something gloomy, hesitant, slightly feeble, that he had never noticed in his friend before.

Had he been like that in the past? Was it that Maigret hadn’t noticed?

‘Cigar?’

There was a stack of boxes on the mantelpiece.

‘I always smoke a pipe.’

‘It’s true. I’d forgotten. I myself haven’t smoked for twelve years.’

‘Doctor’s orders?’

‘No. One fine day, I said to myself that it was stupid to make smoke and . . .’

Rose came in with a tray on which there was a bottle covered

with a fine film of dust from the cellar and a single crystal glass.

'You don't drink any more either?'

'I gave up at the same time. Just a little watered-down wine at mealtimes. As for you, you haven't changed.'

'You think?'

'You appear to be enjoying excellent health. It really is a pleasure to see you.'

Why did he not sound entirely sincere?

'You've promised to visit these parts and then cried off at the last minute so often that I confess I wasn't really expecting you.'

'But here I am, aren't I? You see!'

'Your wife?'

'She's well.'

'She didn't come with you?'

'She doesn't like congresses.'

'Did it go well?'

'We drank a lot, talked a lot, ate a lot.'

'Myself, I travel less and less.'

He lowered his voice because footsteps could be heard upstairs.

'It's difficult with my mother. Besides, I can't leave her on her own any more.'

'Is she still as robust?'

'She hasn't changed. Only her eyesight is deteriorating a little. It upsets her not to be able to thread her needles, but she refuses to wear glasses.'

It was obvious that his mind was elsewhere as he looked at Maigret rather in the same way as Vernoux de Courçon had stared at him in the train.

'Have you heard?'

'About what?'

'About what's going on here.'

'I haven't read the papers for almost a week. But I travelled earlier with a certain Vernoux de Courçon who claims to be your friend.'

'Hubert?'

'I don't know. A man of around sixty-five.'

'That's Hubert.'

There was no sound coming from the town. You could only hear the patter of rain beating against the windowpanes and, from time to time, the crackling of the logs in the hearth. In his day, Julien

Chabot's father had been an investigating magistrate in Fontenay-le-Comte and the study hadn't changed since his son had taken it over.

'In that case, people must have told you-'

'Almost nothing. A journalist with a camera cornered me in the hotel dining room.'

'A redhead?'

'Yes.'

'That's Lomel. What did he say to you?'

'He was convinced I was here to handle some case. I didn't have the time to disabuse him before the police chief turned up too.'

'In short, right now, the entire town knows you're here?'

'Does that bother you?'

Chabot just managed to conceal his hesitation.

'No . . . except that . . .'

'Except that what?'

'Nothing. It's very complicated. You've never lived in a small town like Fontenay.'

'I lived in Luçon for more than a year, you know!'

'There was never a case like the one I've got on my hands.'

'I remember a certain murder, in L'Aiguillon . . .'

'That's true. I was forgetting.'

Maigret was referring to a case where he had been obliged to arrest a former magistrate, universally considered to be utterly respectable, for murder.

'At least it's not as bad as that. You'll find out tomorrow morning. I'd be surprised if the journalists from Paris didn't arrive on the first train.'

'A murder?'

'Two.'

'Vernoux de Courçon's brother-in-law?'

'You see, you do know about it!'

'That's all I've heard.'

'His brother-in-law, yes, Robert de Courçon, who was killed four days ago. That alone would have been enough to cause a scandal. The day before yesterday, it was the widow Gibon's turn.'

'Who is she?'

'No one of importance. Quite the opposite. An old woman who lived alone at the far end of Rue des Loges.'

'What's the connection between the two murders?'

'They were both committed in the same way, probably with the

same weapon.'

'A revolver?'

'No. A blunt object, as we say in police reports. A section of lead piping, or a tool like a monkey wrench.'

'Is that all?'

'Isn't it enough? . . . Sssh!'

The door opened noiselessly and a tiny, thin woman dressed in black walked in, her hand extended.

'It's you, Jules!'

How many years had it been since anyone had called him by his first name?

'My son went to the station. When he came back he told me you wouldn't be coming now and I went upstairs. Haven't you been given anything to eat?'

'He had dinner at the hotel, Mother.'

'What do you mean, at the hotel?'

'He's staying at the Hôtel de France. He refuses to—'

'I won't hear of it! I will not allow you to . . .'

'Believe me, madame, it is much better that I stay at the hotel because the newshounds are already after me. If I were to accept your invitation, tomorrow morning, if not tonight, they'd be ringing your bell non-stop. In fact, it would be better not to say that I'm here at the invitation of your son . . .'

So that was what was bothering the magistrate, and Maigret saw the confirmation written on his face.

'People will still say that you are!'

'I'll deny it. This case, or rather these cases, are none of my concern. I have no intention of getting involved.'

Was Chabot afraid that he would get mixed up in something that was none of his business? Or was he worried that Maigret, with his sometimes rather idiosyncratic methods, could put him in a delicate situation?

Maigret had turned up at a bad time.

'I wonder, Mother, whether Maigret mightn't be right.'

And, turning towards his old friend:

'This is no ordinary investigation, you see. Robert de Courçon, the man who was murdered, was well known, and related in one way or another to all the prominent families in the region. His brother-in-law Vernoux is also a leading figure. After the first murder, rumours began to circulate. Then the widow Gibon was

killed, and that changed the nature of the speculation somewhat. But . . .'

'But . . .?'

'It's hard to explain. The police chief is in charge of the investigation. He's a good man, who knows the town, even though he's from the south, from Arles, I think. The Poitiers Flying Squad's on the scene too. As far as I'm concerned . . .'

The old lady had sat down on the edge of a chair as if she were a visitor, and was listening to her son talk as if listening to the sermon at high mass.

'Two murders in three days, that's a lot for a town with a population of eight thousand. People are getting scared. It's not just because of the rain that there's no one out and about tonight.'

'What do people think?'

'Some reckon it's a madman.'

'Nothing was stolen?'

'Not in either case. And in both instances the murderer gained entry to the house without arousing the victim's suspicion. That's a clue. It's more or less the only one we have.'

'No fingerprints?'

'None. If it is a madman, he'll probably strike again.'

'I see. What about you, what do you think?'

'Nothing. I'm trying to find out. There's something bothering me.'

'What?'

'It's still too vague for me to be able to explain. I have a huge responsibility on my shoulders.'

He said that like an overburdened official. And it was very much an official that Maigret now had in front of him, an official from a small town, living in dread of making a mistake.

Had Maigret become like that with age too? Because of his friend, he felt himself growing old.

'I wonder whether it might be best for me to take the first train to Paris. I only came to Fontenay to say hello to you. I've done that. My presence here is likely to make things difficult for you.'

'What do you mean?'

Chabot's instinctive reaction had not been to protest.

'Already the redhead and the police chief are convinced that you asked me to come to the rescue. People will say that you're afraid, that you don't know how to deal with it, that—'

'Not at all.'

The magistrate half-heartedly dismissed that idea.

'I won't allow you to leave. I'm entitled to receive visits from my friends when I so wish.'

'My son is right, Jules. And I think you should come and stay with us.'

'Maigret prefers to be free to come and go as he pleases, don't you, Maigret?'

'I have my little ways.'

'I shan't press you.'

'I still think it would be for the best if I left tomorrow morning.'

Was Chabot about to concur? The telephone rang and the sound wasn't the same as normal telephones; this one had an old-fashioned ring.

'Would you excuse me?'

Chabot picked up the receiver.

'Investigating Magistrate Chabot speaking.'

The way he said that was another signal, and Maigret tried hard to suppress a smile.

'Who? . . . Oh! Yes . . . Go ahead, Féron . . . What? . . . Gobillard? . . . Where? . . . On the corner of Champ-de-Mars and Rue . . . I'm on my way . . . Yes . . . He's here . . . I don't know . . . Don't let anyone touch anything until I get there . . .'

His mother watched him, one hand on her chest.

'Another one?' she gasped.

He nodded.

'Gobillard.'

He explained to Maigret:

'An old drunkard who everyone in Fontenay knows because he spends most of his time fishing near the bridge. He's just been found dead in the street.'

'Murdered?'

'His skull smashed, like the other two, probably with the same instrument.'

He sprang to his feet, opened the door and took an old trenchcoat from the rack and a battered hat, which he probably only wore when it was raining.

'Are you coming?'

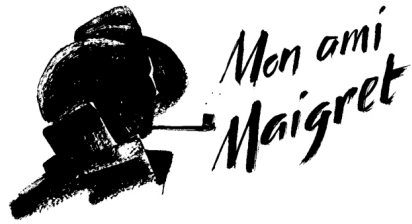
'Are you sure that I should go with you?'

'Now everyone knows you're here, people will wonder why I haven't brought you. Two murders was already a lot. With a third,

people willbe terrified.’

Just as they were leaving, a nervous little hand tugged Maigret’s sleeve and the elderly mother whispered to him:

‘Keep an eye on him, Jules! He’s so conscientious that he doesn’t realize the danger he’s in.’



Pietr the Latvian
The Late Monsieur Gallet
The Hanged Man of Saint-Pholien
The Carter of *La Providence*
The Yellow Dog
Night at the Crossroads
A Crime in Holland
The Grand Banks Café
A Man's Head
The Dancer at the Gai-Moulin
The Two-Penny Bar
The Shadow Puppet
The Saint-Fiacre Affair
The Flemish House
The Madman of Bergerac
The Misty Harbour
Liberty Bar
Lock No. 1
Maigret
Cécile is Dead
The Cellars of the Majestic

The Judge's House
Signed, Picpus
Inspector Cadaver
Félicie
Maigret Gets Angry
Maigret in New York
Maigret's Holiday
Maigret and His Dead Man
Maigret's First Case
My Friend Maigret
Maigret at the Coroner's
Maigret and the Old Lady
Madame Maigret's Friend
Maigret's Memoirs
Maigret at Picratt's
Maigret Takes a Room
Maigret and the Tall Woman
Maigret, Lognon and the Gangsters
Maigret's Revolver
Maigret and the Man on the Bench
Maigret is Afraid

THE BEGINNING

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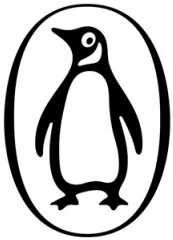

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